WORLDWIDE TRAVELLING

CHINA

WHERE TO GO, WHAT TO SEE

A China Travel Guide

China

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Chaper 1: Introduction

China compels, the world's oldest continuous civilization a roller-coaster ride through captivating contradictions. History buffs immerse themselves, cultural explorers smile as they delve deeper, city breaks are covered, and it would take years to fully discover the eclectic nature on offer. Exotic narratives are omnipresent, blending with the futuristic design and millennia old towns. No country can offer such diversity or deliver such a wide reaching appeal. Yet at the heart of the experience, despite the juxtapositions and inimitability, China is irrefutably China: absolutely unique and unforgettable.

Is there a travel paradigm that the country doesn't offer? Ancient towns deliver shocks of intrigue, like the barefoot monks who walk down cobblestone alleys to historic temples. Then skyscrapers and the ultramodern welcome you to cities of enthusiasm and flashing lights. Wander through the bamboo forest and javelins of light reveal snow capped mountains in the distance. Warriors of terracotta stand beside fortress walls while rural communities retain their inimitability in far flung corners. Meet hundreds of confident students with perfect English, then laugh at the locals who clandestinely take photos of the white person. China offers a dozen different vacations and hundreds of distinct destinations, each confirming that the country is no mere single stereotype. It's as if a whole continent is at the tip of your fingertips, each direction pointing you to something mesmerizingly new.

From the moment you land to the moment you leave there's never any question, never a semblance of doubt about where you are. This is China. It's written onto every face, every street corner, every journey, and every destination. Even in the states annexed by China – like Tibet – the mark of China never leaves. And China is not like anywhere else. It's confusing and challenging. There's limited special treatment. For the most part, you must jump in with two feet and absorb the good and the bad, from deciphering Chinese calligraphy to spending weeks exclusively eating local food.

At the same time, China's greatest appeal is its sheer sundry of destinations. No two travelers' itineraries are the same. In fact, most travelers won't even

cross paths. Head south to forests and mountains, east to cities, down the middle for history, west to historic cultures, and you're only just glimpsing what's on offer. So welcome to China. Welcome to a land that rolls like no other, a place that borders on the surreal and is always sublime. You'll be glad you took the plunge.

Chapter 2: Welcome to China

China at a Glance

China stretches further than the imagination can follow. From the Himalayan mountains that border Pakistan to the rough seas that gaze across at Japan. From arid desert next to Mongolia to lush forests and tropical islands in the south. A new high speed train connects Beijing to Lhasa in Tibet. It takes 38 hours and this journey traverses less than half the country. The country seems to redefine notions of size and geographical barriers add further complications to travel. Anyone attempting to see it all is madly optimistic. Anyone claiming to have seen it all is lying.

China can suit people with any length of time or budget. Even for a few days you can get a glimpse and sense of the country, albeit in just one place. Whole regions can be explored if you have one to two weeks, and the growing collection of airports enable you to stuff different vacations into a handful of action packed days. Travel for longer and China will keep entertaining, whether you're coming for a few weeks or a few months.

Beijing is the capital, tucked away in the northeastern corner and reveling in its historical charm. The economic hub of Shanghai is situated half way down the East Coast and a flurry of flashing lights welcome you to a city with more people than most the world's countries. Down on the southern coast is Hong Kong – part China, part independent state. These three cities are important as they form the basis of a high speed transport channel that runs through the eastern and coastal side of the country.

The western half of China is rural and arid, dominated by the Tibetan plateau and a challenging climate. Travel here is much slower and more difficult, the reward coming from discovering cultures that challenge the ethnic Han majority. Tibet and Northwestern China are poles apart from the East of the country.

Between Northwestern China and the East Coast, the country is heavily marked by industry and cities of ten million inhabitants that the world has hardly ever heard of. Lost amongst the smog are dozens of ancient

beguiling destinations, each reliving a different dynasty and allowing an escape into new paradigms.

As the Himalayas descend east of Tibet, most of Southern China is remarkably lush and green. This is a region of bamboo forests, river journeys, limestone karsts, and alpine lakes. Like most of the country, historic towns are dotted amongst it all.

Despite the fact that some Chinese journeys are measured in days, not hours, getting between destinations is far easier than most imagine. 20 years ago the situation would have been different. But airports are springing up everywhere, enabling multiple destinations to open up to those with minimal time. The train services have always been excellent and they continue to improve. Many long distance journeys are scheduled to travel overnight, so with a comfortable air-conditioned sleeper, you drift off in the mountains and wake up on the coast.

Like all things China there are vast disparities between regions. Distance on a map is never an accurate indicator of how long a journey will take. For example, in Sichuan province it can take 8 – 10 hours to cover 200 miles in a rickety bus. On the East Coast, that distance takes little over an hour. Communication barriers and accommodation quality also heavily depends on where you are.

But let's dwell on the positives here. It wasn't that long ago that all of China was a very challenging destination to travel in. While some regions still pose difficulties, it adds doses of excitement. For the rest, the country's remarkable transformation is finally making some of the world's most unique experiences accessible to the world. So forget your preconceptions: You'll get on just fine in China.

Iconic Experiences

China isn't short of the iconic and unforgettable. Here's a quick flavor to get you excited:

• No world landmark can compete with the scale of the Great Wall of China. It can
be explored at a series of destinations near Beijing as well as in the central regions.

• Dazzling with evening neon lights, Shanghai's Pudong District is the futuristic face
of Asia, filled with sublime views and revolving restaurants.
• Exquisite limestone karsts guide your journey through the forest clad mountains of
south China, evocative Guilin the most impressive of the region's natural attractions.
• The eastern terminus of the Old Silk Road, Xian was the capital of China for over
1000 years, and its relics span across the times of 73 different emperors.
• In a couple of towns in Tibetan Sichuan, high up Buddhist monks are buried by
having their bodies left to the vultures in a remarkable sky burial.
• The renowned backpacker hangout of Dali is a place where travelers can easily get
stuck for weeks within its ancient town streets.
• In the far northwest of China, Kashgar is one of the world's great trading posts, a
place where the currency is still measured in sheep and donkeys.

Unique Experiences

Here are a few examples of China's diversity

• Beijing has it all, from the memories found in Tiananmen Square to the Bird's Nest

Olympic Stadium and Chairman Mao's mausoleum.

• Discover the surreal circular mud houses of Yongding Country, surprisingly close

to modern Shanghai.

• Explore some of Hong Kong's hidden islands, uninhabited places that contrast

the chaos of the central streets.

• Immerse yourself in the ancient brilliance of Pingyao, a utopia of pedestrianized

streets and antique stores selling communist relics.

• Sit on a panda's lap and question why they're so infertile at the panda breeding

center in Chengdu.

• Discover the beauty of Chinese rice paddies and wooden villages in the south of

Yunnan Province.

• Ascend to the promised land and discover the beauty of Tibet.

How to Use This Guidebook

Let's not pretend this guidebook can tell you everything about China. Claiming to do so would be obtuse and laughably optimistic. It would be the equivalent of a guidebook claiming to the complete bible to travel in the whole of the Americas, covering Alaska to Argentina and everything in between. Instead, the guidebook prefers to be concise and comprehensive in its coverage of typical paths and travels in the country. This applies to 95% of visitors: those coming as a tourist and traveling in China.

A guidebook that covered absolutely everything China would be too big for your backpack, even when it's in electronic form. Most major China guidebooks run to 1000+ pages and it takes half an hour to figure out where to even start reading. With so much going on, you really don't want your head stuck in the e-reader. The approach of this guidebook is different. If it's important it's included. If it's not important – e.g. soulless industrial city – it's left out.

Chapter 3: Before You Visit China: The Essential Information

This chapter contains the essential information required to transform China reverie into China reality. By the end of the chapter you should have a good understanding of how to make a China trip happen, as well as some indicative ideas on where to visit.

When to Go

This isn't visiting Mediterranean Europe. There is no single best time to go. China can be perfect at all months of the year. It could also be avoided at all months of the year. Climatic regional differences are more pronounced than any other country in the world. So while one region is enjoying its prime visitor season, another is inaccessible due to mountains of show. Rural China will be -40oF in winter. Hong Kong midsummer hovers around 100oF. So think less about the ideal time to visit China and more about the ideal time to visit the destinations you're most interested in. Best and worst seasons are included in the Where to Go section below.

As a general rule, summers in China are hot. Even the snowy summits can't disguise temperatures that roast in the 80's and 90's. Summer is also the peak travel season due to local student holidays. Domestic tourists far outnumber foreign tourists in most of China, and this rush to explore the country is most apparent during summer. Winter is obviously colder. That makes some destinations inaccessible, but also brings central and southern China into pleasant and dry weather. Spring and fall are somewhere in between.

Planning an Itinerary

A China trip could last a few days. It could also last a few years. In reality, your trip is going to be somewhere in between. Despite the rapid improvements in transport, long journeys are likely to feature highly in any trip. Being overly optimistic and cramming dozens of destinations into two weeks invariably results in too many bored hours sat on a train or plane.

Another major consideration is the size of most destinations. Most cities are on gargantuan proportions and it's difficult to see anything if you're just around for one day. Likewise, the natural attractions are vast and not easily glimpsed from afar. The best side of China is found when you really explore. And in this case, you can explore more by planning to do less.
In one week it's advisable to stick to a single region. With two weeks you could also stay in one region. However, with more time it's easy to immerse yourself in more than one region. Each of the destination chapters contains different itineraries, one covering the classic trip and others going more off the beaten track. These are based around the region's transport hub and major city, like Shanghai or Hong Kong. These hubs are important because they're almost unavoidable. This is where you'll find airports with excellent domestic connections, and railway stations with lines scattering into all corners of the country.

Getting to China

Three major airports provide the most common entry to China. These are Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. International flights arrive from every continent and these hubs provide easy onward connection to anywhere in the country. Three other airports offer an alternative, each of them rapidly expanding and good choices for trips in the south: Guangzhou, Chongqing, and Chengdu.
As the domestic air network continues to spread its wings, arriving at any of these airports ensures that you can reach virtually any destination in China within a day. Budget airlines are beginning to operate, drastically reducing the cost and time of traveling cross country. It's usually cheaper to find flights to one of the major airports and then book domestic connections separately, than find an airline that will offer the complete package.

Accommodation

It generally comes as a huge surprise, but China's network of youth hostels are amongst the best in the world. They're clean, affordable, indelibly social, and the best place to meet locals who can speak English. In many ways they're a throwback to the original concept of youth hostels, offering a haven where travelers can come together and share the experiences. Prices

vary across the country but expect to pay around $10-15 for a dorm bed and $30-40 for a double in the East. It could be less than half this price the further you travel west. Most travelers are surprised at the quality. In a country stereotyped for dirt, you might expect the hostels to be uncomfortably squalid. Which certainly isn't true.

Budget hotels offer rooms for a similar price and they generally do their best to reconfirm the stereotypes and preconceptions. You'd be hard pressed to find a traveler who preferred budget hotels to hostels. Similarly, you'd struggle to justify spending more for a mid-range hotel. While the price increase may bring a bigger room, the lack of other travelers and limited English can be a frustration. Note that the majority of hotels are built to cater for a local business and tourist market. Think blaring televisions in each room and restaurants filled with smoke. It's only at the high-end that services become more tailored towards foreign tastes.

In a country with the challenges of China, it's the hostels that help keep people sane and offer a platform for an invaluable sharing of information. Other travelers are the chief source of up to date travel knowledge and over oodles of green tea they spread their stories. China's hostels are predominantly staffed by young English speaking locals, often the ones that idolize the West and would much rather spend their time hanging out with foreigners. They are also invaluable in assisting with local travel plans.

Many hostels collaborate together, so one hostel books your bed in the next destination, and so on and so on for months at a time. So while travel itineraries are very different, it's common to bump into the same faces somewhere down the line. Populating China's hostels are an eclectic bunch of travelers, everything from European families to retired Irish ladies, and gap year youngsters to middle-aged couples. China attracts a vast mix of nationalities and friendships are often forged over a communal hostel meal.

Towards the top end of the market, China has been building many tourist focused hotels and resorts. These are geared towards foreign and higher-end Chinese markets, in particular, visitors on short organized tours. They're good value when compared to similar standard hotels in Europe and the US. Expect to pay $70 – 120 for a double. Most destinations have at least a couple of options. Further up the scale, the high-end hotels and resorts are also better value than Europe but you'll have to pay for the luxury.

Transport

While it sounds daunting, local transport is also one of the great attractions of China. Yes the journeys are long, but just imagine how long they could have been. In general, visitors always have options.

Chinese Trains The vast train network provides the mainstay of long-distance travel in China. Around a quarter of the world's total rail traffic is in China, a remarkable ode to the efficiency and complexity of the railways. The high-speed express lines in the east are amongst the fastest in the world, while the slower intercity services still hurtle along at around 80mph. Delays are very rare (certainly when compared to Europe), as the tracks cut across great swathes of the country. Furthermore, ticket prices are controlled by government to ensure the general population can afford to travel.

Most valuable to travelers is the preference for scheduling direct services to run overnight, maximizing time spent in a destination and meaning a saving in accommodation costs. Other than the 180mph lines that hurtle down the East Coast and inland to Guangzhou and Xian, you're likely to be traveling overnight China has a variety of train types, from the new G-series to the old K-series, each going a slightly different speeds. There's little point detailing them: the best bet is likely to be the quickest service to your destination. As a general rule, the trains are faster in the east and older in the west.

On most train services there are five classes. Also on board you'll find a restaurant car and a couple of obsequious vendors wandering around with trolleys of snacks.

Traveling by Air

Airlines are cropping up all over China, leaving traveling with a sometimes baffling range of choice. The three main carriers are the international ones: Air China, China Southern, and China Eastern. Regional cities have added their domestic brands with every city seeming to roll out a plane and claim to have an airline: like Hainan Airlines, Shanghai Airlines, Hong Kong Airlines, Sichuan Airlines...you get the picture. While the major cities are obvious hubs, almost every state now has a well connected airport. Flying is

cheap and quick and there is no longer a corner of China that isn't connected.

Traveling by Road

Foreigners aren't permitted to drive in China, unless they pass a local driving test and jump through a hundred administrative hoops. So a hire car is out of the question. Private hire taxis become an affordable means of transport when the cost is shared between a few passengers. Anywhere within a couple of hours drive should be affordable if you're not solely picking up the bill.

Chinese buses are sometimes the only transport in mountainous regions. These can often be filled with cigarette smoke and cling to the edge of precipitous cliffs. Overcrowding is common, but not what it once was. In general, the more recognized the route, the better quality of bus. In rural areas, expect many preconceptions of Asian bus travel to be realized. They're crowded, uncomfortable, painfully slow yet driven with dangerous abandon, and always a memorable experience. More so than with trains, deciphering your destination at a bus station can be complicated and confusing. Memorizing the symbols for your destination is essential.

In other areas, there's absolutely no reason to go by bus rather than train: cost, comfort, safety and reliability, are all in favor of the railways.

Taxis are found everywhere. In cities they have standardized meters and costs. In other destinations, prices need to be negotiated and agreed in advance. Hostels usually have a couple of reliable English speaking drivers they use with set prices.

Getting a Visa

Almost all Western visitors to China will need to arrange a visa in advance. Embassy officials don't ask many questions and the process is simple enough, as long as you're near to a Chinese embassy. Visit the embassy, fill out the application form, pay the fee, and leave your passport. You may have to “prove” you're a tourist, but this rarely requires more than writing down the destinations you intend to visit (although it's slightly stricter for US citizens). Different embassies have vastly different processing times.

Some will take a few days, others a few weeks. There will also be options to pay an additional fee to get your visa express.

A standard tourist visa will be valid for 30 days and must be used within three months of the date of issue. A double entry visa will usually be valid for two visits of up to 30 days within a six month period. However, neither of these are absolutely guaranteed and there are reports are visitors being given less time. For longer China trips a double or even multiple entry visas is worth the extra money.

Many travel agents and tour companies can obtain Chinese visas for an additional cost. The $50 is usually worth it considering you don't have to travel to your capital city and wait in the embassy. Add on extra costs for having your passport sent by recorded mail.

Once in the country, it's possible to extend a tourist visa for another 30 days at any of the regional administrative capitals. This is a relatively simple process but does take a few working days, which can mean a bored stopover if you arrive at the weekend.

Chapter 4: How To Survive In China

A Little Introduction to China...

China is a chaotic yet serene place, a country of hyper-development and also of history, and a destination that many travelers put in the “love it or hate it” category. Some people certainly love it. And some hate it. However, this descriptive mantra doesn't do justice to the China travel experience. In reality, everyone loves certain aspects of the country and begins to hate others. So first the good...It's beautiful, alternative, packed with culture, full of fascination, and every day brings something utterly memorable.

So what is there to hate? Well...pollution can spoil, never-ending crowds can be tiresome, language barriers frustrating, and certain customs repulsing. In China you can't go in halfhearted. From the moment you land you're engulfed in everything that's good and bad about the country. Even when they offer specialist luxury tourist services, it tends to be more Chinese than everything else. At first, some of these challenges are nothing more than challenges. They add excitement, can be thrown to the back of the mind, and ensure entertainment. However, most travelers seem to have a breaking point, reached when the residual moments of China's bad build to an unstoppable level. It won't happen in your first week. Maybe not even in your second month. But almost every traveler reaches a time when the bad outweighs the good.

How to Make Peace With China...

Reaching this saturation point can spoil a whole trip. The great memories are displaced by images of smog, spit, and rough nights spent on a grubby sleeper train carriage. Managing the oscillating emotions is essential in keeping China high and happy in the memory bank. Here are some ideas:

• Long distance travel can showcase some of the worst of China. Filthy carriages, landscapes ruined by pollution, locals continually spitting on the floor. Taking too many long distances in a short amount of time really builds on the nerves. But these trains can also be wonderful experiences, especially if you're pay for the first class carriages.

• While China can be cheap, the cheapest isn't that much different from the mid-
range. Paying a little more goes a long way to maintaining your sanity, especially when it comes to somewhere to sleep.
• Spending money to relieve the stress can be worth the hit on the bank account. For example, taking two nights at a lavish mountain resort can recharge the batteries after a few days on rickety mattresses.
• Take the language barrier with a pinch of salt. While it's frustrating, it can be funny
and there's always the surge of pride when you decipher the symbols.
• The Chinese are generally honest and unlikely to deliberately rip off tourists, English speaking taxi drivers being the chief exception. Sometimes you hear groups of locals discussing you and it's easy to assume the worst. They're more likely to be arguing to ensure you get the best.
• Tourist rip offs are far more likely to be organized by the local government, involving outrageous entrance tickets to relatively average attractions. If it's too much, just say no.
• Book long-distance trains a few days in advance to ensure a bed on an air-conditioned sleeper carriage.
• If you can't use chopsticks carry a fork in your pocket.
• Most importantly, take advantage of any home comforts whenever they arise.

Culture Shock

China offers one of the planet's most overbearing culture shocks. A thousand faces stop and stare, grandmothers leave meters of phlegmy spit on the floor, whiffs of stale tobacco come from many street corners, and you wonder why you came. Then there's the crowds and lack of space, or the shockingly limited visibility as smog swirls and finds a way into your nostrils. But don't worry, there are also good things about Chinese culture. And rather than criticize foreigners for not following Chinese customs, the locals will be gracious whenever anyone is willing to try.
The strangest aspect of the culture shock is the local fascination in you, the Western skinned visitor. In rural areas you'll meet locals wanting to stroke your arm hairs or running a hand through the head of blonde hair.

Unsuccessfully attempting to be discreet, hundreds will be snapping photos of you on their camera phone. Don't get too annoyed. It's only the same as you wanting to take a photo of some enchanting looking local in a traditional village. Gradually the shock wears off and it all become parts of daily life.

Food can also be challenge, although some will claim that it's a highlight. There is nothing wrong with the food of course, it just gets a little monotonous when you've only been eating Chinese for a month. That's Chinese breakfasts (no cereal here), Chinese snacks, Chinese dinners, and so much rice you're about to pop. Regional variations help break the routine. While a number of tourist leaning restaurants offer Western dishes, the quality is almost always a disappointment: think two inch thick pizzas, too many chips, and bread that tastes of sawdust.

But perhaps hardest to get used to is the lack of foreigners. Of course there are other visitors. You'll see them at hostels and at major attractions. So where do they go? They're not in your train carriage or in the same local restaurant. Even in a heavily touristic area, you still get a semblance of shock when you spot another tourist on the street. This lack of visible tourists is a prime reason why China's excellent hostel network is a highlight of the experience. When you go long without seeing a foreign face, or speaking English, a hostel's sociable atmosphere is key to your sanity.

Language

Language is one of China's great challenges. In most countries, it's relatively to easy to learn a few basic phrases and combine them with locals' pidgin English. Unfortunately, Mandarin's tonal structure can make ordering a bowl of rice a two month learning curve. Speaking is not the biggest problem. Reading often brings the most frustration. Turn up at the train station and a dazzling collection of symbols indicate your destination. So which is Shanghai? And which is Guangzhou? And what do all the strange lines and slants mean on the train ticket?

In the last ten years there's been a huge move by the Chinese government to incorporating Chinese. This is centered on Beijing and the city was transformed for the 2008 Olympics. Shanghai is also relatively multilingual,

and Hong Kong will pose no problems (it was a British colony after all). In these, and many other major Eastern cities, you'll find signs in English in train stations and on the streets. These cities are also the hub of a growing English speaking population. Elsewhere, the situation is improving quickly in urban areas. Rural communities and smaller destinations are where you'll face the biggest challenges. High-end tourist establishments understand the importance of English communication, but note that many mid-range places will be tailored to the local market.

Millions of Chinese are learning English as the country modernizes. Many of these people have never had the opportunity to practice their English with foreign visitors. It's become a huge source of pride to communicate in English and help out a tourist. Remember, it's still common for locals to take discreet photos of foreigners. Imagine how they feel to be able to converse and then pose for a selfie afterwards. In most places, there's likely to be someone who can help. And that person will desperately want to help.

All across the country you'll see Mandarin translated in English. Well, not really English, more the crossbreed of Chinglish. This makes for some hilarious moments as the phrases are pushed through google translate or equivalent. For example: “happy to come to eat the shop;” “to abuse plastic bag – please pay money each 2 dollar;” “this WC is free of washing;” please leave off after pissing or shitting;” and “erection in progress,” to describe that a path closed for roadworks.

Hostel staff and tour guides are also invaluable in overcoming the language barrier. When booking a train ticket, they will write down what you need so you can silently approach the ticket office. They can also write down the basics for ordering food, like the symbols for meat or rice. The key rule is to ask for help, muddling through on your own is a last resort.

Chapter 5: Beijing & the Northeast

Beijing is a mishmash of centuries and cultures, the modern mixing with the ancient on streets of intrigue. Sprinkled around the center are some of the world's most iconic sights, unmissable odes to civilization that combine inspiring scale with inimitable intimacy. The mountainous Northeast is one rarely visited by tourists, other than on a series of day trips from the capital, the most famous being the Great Wall of China. As the country's capital and cultural center, Beijing is on virtually every traveler's itinerary, not least because of its status as international transport hub. Thanks to its labyrinthine hutongs, Beijing feels significantly older and more traditional than Shanghai and Hong Kong. Even though these traditional narrow lanes are being pulled down, the city has developed outwards from the upwards.
This chapter covers Beijing along with with the provinces in the northeast of the country.

Practical Information

Getting Here: Most people will land in Beijing. The cheapest and quickest route from the airport is by the Airport Express train line. If taking a taxi, use the official taxi queue as there are numerous reports of overcharging from feverish touts. Trains arrive in Beijing from all across China, terminating in a series of stations, each on the metro line.
Getting Around: A vast overhaul for the 2008 Olympics transformed the Beijing metro into one of the world's best. Not only are the signs in English, they're not in Chinglish, so visitors can make sense of them. The metro will take you most places but be careful to plan a day before setting off, as the distances can mean potentially long underground trips. Buy a pre-paid card to save time: most journeys cost around $0.50 to $1.50.
Heading into Northeast China is possible by train, bus, or private hire.
Beijing was a city of a million bikes although that's quickly being replaced by cars. Still, it's a very flat city and experienced cyclists find the traffic and cycle lanes manageable.

Essential Beijing

• Tiananmen Square was the scene of countless historic moments in world history,
each usually involving huge parades and a sprinkling of tanks. It's one of the world's largest city squares and flanked by some glorious buildings, making it a free and iconic start to exploring the city.
• Beijing's monuments always defy impressions of scale. The Forbidden City
dominates central Beijing, the historic emperors' home protected by towering walls and gates. Enter and gasp at the size of the courtyard, ornate buildings lining the walls and each corner. The Hall of great Harmony and Gate of Heavenly Peace are perhaps the two most iconic photographs. There's somewhere between 9,000 – 10,000 rooms in the Forbidden City and the ones that can be visited are part of the Palace Museum, a huge complex dating from the 15th century. Each bursts with relics from throughout the ages; in particular, ceramics, paintings, bronze, enamel, and sculptures. It's estimated that there are over a million works of rare or valuable art in the collection.
• Chairman Mao is laid to rest in the Chairman Mao Memorial Wall, (on Tiananmen
Square) lying peacefully in preservation in the mausoleum. In high season there's long queues of locals waiting an hour for a 20 second allotted peek at the great man; if there's not a queue it's a real tick of the list world monument.
• China's largest religious building is the Temple of Heaven, a pointing pagoda
standing that's almost always insanely crowded. Admiring from the outside is an alternative to queuing for the inside. The temple is set in a vast parkland which also helps provide an escape. Vendors take round little glasses of tea to help reenergize.
• Beijing's most visited gardens are those at the Summer Palace, a green expanse filled with pagodas, pavilions, and royal mansions. After the three iconic sights above, the Summer Palace tends to serve as the resting place for tourists with sore feet and full camera memory cards. The impressive architecture makes this the most beautiful of Beijing's parks, but in summer, it's not always the peaceful escape you're looking for. Just a few hundreds

meters away, the Old Summer Palace lies in ruins but still screams of Qing emperor indulgence.

• Two other famous parks offer a similar concoction of historic architecture that curls above a lake. 13Th century Beihei Park is quaint and green, the pavilions appearing between vast stretches of indigenous plants. Jingshan Park is where the locals hang out and do their communal dance sessions – always entertaining – and a good place to find some solace.

• The huge National Museum of China covers the history of China, albeit from a very biased perspective (but aren't all national museums?) It's certainly full of some intriguing stories and political themes, made the more better because it's free to enter.

• Beijing's ancient hutongs, or neighborhoods of narrow alleyways, are mostly a thing of the past. Nanluoguxiang is the most accessible as it's within walking distance of the Forbidden City. It takes you on a twisting journey through traditional homes to elegant courtyards and a couple of fascinating monuments like the Bell and Drum Towers. Seemingly hundreds of drivers line the entrances with their modernized cycle rickshaws – they can take you on a tour but negotiate hard for the price. It may be more enjoyable to walk.

• For a taste of innovative modern Beijing, the district of Chaoyang contains many of the city's remarkable architectural landmarks. Guided tours can be taken of the Bird's Nest (the 2008 Olympic Stadium), a mass of unusual design that still lights up at night. The Olympic Park also includes the dazzling Water Cube. Nearby, the World Trade Center Tower III and the “Bird's Legs” (CCTV Building) make for iconic photos. Also check out the “Beijing egg”, otherwise known as the glittering.

National Center for the Performing Arts

Uncovered Beijing

• Beijing's best preserved historic neighborhoods are found in Hou Hai, where hutong

alleyways spread out from the lakes of Oianhai, Xihai, and Houhai. Cycle rickshaws take you on tours but it's also possible to simply get lost in the maze and admire the odes to tradition. Be sure to stop for a glass of green tea in one of the many local tea shops. On the northern side of this area, the Peking Former Residence of Soong Ching Ling is a delightful traditional house of the elite.

• Shijia Hutong is a smaller and quieter neighborhood to explore. Qianmen has a

similar vibe to Hou Hai although it's been restored to its history rather than preserved. Littered with shops and restaurants it's an atmospheric place to spend the evening and absorb the vibrancy. Wanfujing Street is similar and filled with the weird and wonderful of Beijing culture (like taking your photo with a pet rabbit in a cage).

• Another place for evening entertainment is the Donghuamen Night Market or

Dong Hua Men Night Market, a place where you sample all the stereotyped strange food China is famous for: turtles, grasshoppers, snakes, smelly smelly tofu, frogs etc.

• Some 700 years old and still revealing its history as the place for sacrifices, the

Temple of Confucius and Guozijian Museum now holds the Capital Museum and rarely gets a tourist.

• One of the world's oldest observatories, Guguanxiangtai is filled with equipment

from the Ming and Qing dynasties, enabling a time hop into how the world used to explore the wider universe.

• Spend an evening experiencing Chinese performing art at the Forbidden City

Music Hall, an immense palace that shimmers with the ambiance of historic times. Another look at old opulence is the Great Hall of the People.

• China has always had a certain military might and the Military Museum does an

excellent job of spanning the eras and dynasties. It's certainly interesting to see how the country has always been involved in something.

• Contemporary Chinese art generally gets hidden behind porcelain and ancient

dynasty paintings. 798 Art Zone is the country's hub for modern artists and the changing exhibitions confound all preconceptions of Chinese art. This is also a good place to meet local students.

• A selection of smaller parks weave through forests on the edges of Beijing.

Xiangshon Gongyuan (Fragrant Hills) are the most local of these and a place to drink tea or get involved with the mass tai chi sessions. Also in Haidian District you'll find the Beijing Botanical Garden. During summer, Ritan Park is the one that maintains a very local feel and misses almost every tourist radar. Yuyuantan Park is out of town but situated on a serene lake.

Around Beijing

These places are best visited on a series of day trips from Beijing. This is mostly due to the excellent transport from the capital and better accommodation options.

• The Great Wall of China is one of the world's great landmarks, stretching for

thousands of miles to protect the country against Genghis Khan's Mongol Empire. Up to 20 meters thick and almost impossibly steep, the wall is the most popular day trip from Beijing. There are a series of distinct sections that can be visited, each with its own advantages. Most people arrange transport via their hostel / hotel to visit the wall, although it's possible to do it by a long public transport journey. At each of the following you can walk along the walls - beware that it's very steep but getting the legs into gear

helps get you away from the crowds. Allow at least half a day to do any of these trips:

◦ Badaling is the most popular and most crowded, generally due to its proximity to Beijing (also making it the cheapest to get to), but also its iconic setting. In winter it's still great here, but summer can be astonishingly crowded and most of the charm is lost. If the crowds get too much, the nearby Badaling National Forest Park provides an escape.

◦ Huanghuacheng is a regular stop on Great Wall tours and offers the revered combination of massive walls, huge towers, and steps that make the legs complain the next day. Very similar to Badaling.

◦ Mutianyu is a longer drive than Badaling but doesn't get as crowded, especially with local tourists. In particular, it's easy to wander off towards Jiankou and feel like you're in the middle of nowhere. There's a cable car to the top for those who don't want to walk.

◦ To escape the crowds, strap on your walking boots and visit Jiankou. You're in a remote part of Northeast China and much of the wall isn't restored. This trip requires private transport. Expect two to three hours walking to get from the road and see the huge ramparts. A great full day hike goes from Jiankou to Mutianyu.

◦ Changping and Hairou Xiangshuihu are also good places for seeing the Great Wall without the great crowd.

◦ The Juyong Pass of the Great Wall has been heavily restored but has an idolized setting tumbling down a forested hill. Less popular than others.

◦ Punggu Jiangjunguan is usually an add on to one of the above: it's hard to press a claim for visiting here over the other spots.

• Tianjen is one of China's most developed cities and is connected by high speed
train to Beijing. At its heart are the Five Avenues, where a collection of buildings have been built in famous styles from around the world: Gothic, Italian Renaissance, British, etc. Nearby, Tianjin Ancient Culture Street provides an easy pathway between the city's Qing dynasty landmarks, like the Matsu Temple.

• Just over an hour from Beijing, JuYong Guan is a traditional series of hutongs
without the tourist crowds of Nanluoguxiang. Protected by UNESCO it's a place to observe local life seemingly unchanged for centuries. Cuandixia

Village is much older, a few millennia of history to be discovered on the crumbled streets. It's a bit like their version of Roman ruins.

• Hongluo Temple is a fascinating alternative to getting crushed in the central Beijing temples. Two temples stand either side of Five Hundred Arhat Garden and it's easy to lose a day absorbed in the area.

Far Northeastern China

These remote regions feature immense stretches of wilderness and adventures largely into the unknown.

• Northwest of Beijing lies the vast desert region of Inner Mongolia. Annexed from

Mongolia, it retains an authentic portrayal of nomadic life. Horse riding trips and spending the night in a nomadic gur are the highlights of the experience, both easily arranged in the regional capital of Hohhot. Surreally beautiful despite having no obvious landmarks, Inner Mongolia is much more Mongolia than China and a good chance to getaway into silence and forgotten lifestyles.

• Bordering North Korea, the province of Liaoning is hotchpotch of influences:

Russian, Japanese, Imperial Chinese, Korean, Chinese Han, and Manchurian. It's particularly appealing to anyone who has spent a long amount of time in Asia or China and seeks a culture that confounds stereotypes. This was a place of ancient capitals and history although what remains is only what was saved from the marauding Mongols. Shenyang, Anstan, and Benxi have some fascinating World Heritage Sites, but like most of Liaoning, the challenge is to see them through the smog.

• Heading towards Russia, you reach Jilin and then Heilongjiang Provinces. Both have former capitals with imperial tombs and temples, the most impressive being Goguryeo in Jilin. The regions are most famous for their annual winter snow festivals, where great ice sculptures are created and the national parks are resplendent beneath a coating of white. Harbin is the most famous (probably in the world) although Jilin city is easier to reach from Beijing. They start just after new year and run until the snow melts. The other prime attraction here is the Siberian Tiger Reserve, home to many tigers and roaming through trees.

Chapter 6: The East Coast & Shanghai

China's East Coast is a mass of development and modernism, home to the world's largest ports and a series of cities that move at hyper-speed. Yet there's more to the East than what initially meets the eye. Tucked in the mountains behind the coast, the provinces of Anhui and Jiangxi revel in delivering odes of history. In just two hours you can travel from a 40th story Shanghai revolving restaurant to an ancient capital hidden in a river gorge. South-central Anhui and Jiangxi are included here as they benefit from the East Coast's exceptional transport system, one that allows visitors to cover vast distances and paradigms in minimal time. In many ways, this area is China in a nutshell: hurtling into the future yet continuing to honor its past.

Practical Information

Getting Here: With its huge international airport and excellent rail connections, Shanghai is the major city and route focus. Like Beijing, direct trains and flights arrive here from all across China. Visitors to the East Coast will invariably pass through Shanghai, it serves as the center point for journeys across the region. The international and domestic airports, and the four major train stations are all on the metro line. However, the best introduction to Shanghai is to take the Maglev, the 267mph train that uses magnetic levitation technology to travel between Pudong International Airport and downtown in just seven minutes.

Getting Around: High-speed railways will form the main part of most itineraries, complimented by buses when visiting the mountain areas. This is perhaps the easiest of China's regions to get around.

Shanghai has an excellent metro system which is relatively easy to decipher (still some Chinglish and confused faces but light years ahead of rural China). Load a Shanghai Jiaotong Card with Y100 and that should last you for a few days exploring. Taxis are ubiquitous but the cost soon adds up as Shanghai is bigger than some European countries.

The Best of Shanghai Seeing all of China's biggest city would take a while. But with the irritation of pollution and overcrowding, sticking to two or

three days helps maintain a positive impression of the city - this is the world's most populous city (with 25 million plus residents) after all.

• Shanghai has always been China's prosperous economic hub and this is exemplified along The Bund, a riverside strip of colonial houses and history. While most of the buildings can't be visited, the riverfront walkway is the iconic attraction in Shanghai, especially with the view across the water to the skyscrapers of Pudong.

• Pudong is the new commercial district of Shanghai (and China), taking over from the Bund with its futuristic skyscrapers and dazzling skyline. One trip to space is at the Shanghai World Financial Center. A lightening quick elevator takes you over 100 floors high to views onto the sprawling Shanghai cityscape. Another is in the Oriental Pearl Tower. For both, it's best to wait for a sunny moment. A Riverside Promenade runs besides the skyscrapers and is always fun when the evening lights are flashing.

• Within walking distance of The Bund, Shanghai's Chinese history is preserved in a tiny area known as the Old City. Wooden houses dominate winding streets and the City God Temple is a well refurbished ode to forgotten times. Yu Garden is not especially peaceful but it's a beautiful little space that's great for people watching. A place to escape the noise is Jing'an Sculpture Park, full of tai chi groups and sculptures of animals.

• Shanghai's more traditional attractions are all found in a hub of activity in the center of the city, the Huangpu District. It's obscenely crowded and intense here, especially if you use the city's biggest metro station.

◦ The excellent Shanghai Museum could take a whole day to really see, but it's well laid out and you can select your exhibits. The galleries of Chinese art and artifacts are the most impressive.

◦ Every Chinese export you find on your own high street can be found on Nanjing Road, a chaotic street selling plastic junk, electronics, and just about everything you associate with a Chinese factory. It's sold at cheaper prices than the shops at home.

◦ People's Square isn't as grand as in Beijing but makes a good job of showcasing Shanghai's modern and old architecture. Sit on one of the

benches and sip a tea sold by one of the many vendors. Bizarrely, the bird sounds are played through loudspeakers.

◦ While it doesn't sound that exciting, the Shanghai Urban Planning Exhibition Hall has a wonderful scale model of the world's most populous city. It gets most people gasping in admiration.

• Luwan and Xuhui were once known as the Paris of the East, although the evidence of France is really hidden amongst the gleaming shopping malls that dominate the suburbs. The row of streets known as the French Concession are now an alluring look at how Shanghai combines the old and new. Getting lost down the alleys of Tian Zi Fang is always amusing and a good way to experience the area. The refurbished Xintiandi Shikumen House showcases a more authentically Chinese side to the French Concession.

• Another fascinating look at Shanghai's past is in the Jewish Ghetto, once the poorest place in the city but now a hive of temples, shopping malls, and Jewish life.

• An entirely different perspective on the history of China is on display at the Shanghai Propoganda Poster Art Center features impressive walls of Chairman Mao et al given their message to the country.

• Shanghai's biggest temple complex, the Longhua Temple is a mix of pagodas and pavilions that have been preserved and reconstructed in the style of 242AD. It's easily the city's finest group of temples.

• Shanghai is big on song, dance, and evening entertainment. ERA Acrobats and Shanghai Circus World combine elements of traditional ballet, modern dance, and somersaults of Olympian proportions. Book in advance on the weekends.

• M50 Creative Park reveals a side to Shanghai that you suspected existed but didn't know where. Covered in graffiti and sprinkled with the creative youth of the country, it's a good place to meet the chic English speaking students of the city.

The East Coast South of Shanghai

Travelers sticking to the coast tend to hurtle along on their way through to Hong Kong and South China. The coast's ports and fuming chimneys are off putting, but a slower journey through here takes in some fascinating historic districts and unique flavors. The following are listed from north to south from Shanghai.

• Hangzhou is China's most popular domestic tourism destination, which might
explain why most foreigners give it a wide berth. The ancient Chinese capital is just one hour high speed train south of Shanghai and continues to revel in its two core industries: silk and tea. The historic attractions are mostly situated on the beautiful and vast West Lake, with boat rides taking you between them. These include temples, pagodas, cute bridges, churches, and some delightful causeways. There's enough to spread the domestic tourists, particularly in terms of temples and pagodas. Leifeng, Lingyin, and Baochu are all beautiful and serene. The whole area around the lake is a World Heritage Site and most foreign tourists spend a day selectively combining a few of the historic attractions.

• A short bus ride from Hangzhou, Anji country takes you mystically into bamboo
forests and iconic Chinese nature. This is where Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon was filmed and the landscape looks every bit as inspiring. Somewhere amongst the bamboo plantations are old forest villages although these are all very tourist facing given the bus loads of Chinese tourists that come through.

• The preserved houses of Shaoxing city are romantic in the low season, the curving
roof tiles sitting above shops selling trinkets and red Chairman Mao books. It's also a lovely place to stay and soak up old China. However, the rest of the city is an industrial mess and the old town can be hideously crowded in summer.

• Fujian Province has always been one of China's most prosperous, a place of continual exports even before the West starting importing. An alluring set of mountains dissect the region, separating the coast from the tea growing plateaus. Taking the high speed line down the coast you pass through

Fuzhou and Putian, before the historic port city of Quanzhou, an interesting place of history and flashing lights to break a journey.

• Perhaps most interesting along the series of ports is Xiamen, part island and part mainland city with special economic status. While it's not quite Hong Kong, the experience is similar, full of sparkling skyscrapers, English speaking locals, foreign enclaves, and vibrant suburbs. Don't expect dozens of sights, but if you're looking for a few creature comforts and a dose of Westernization, Xiamen delivers.

• Inland Fujian requires you to move by public bus, the green mountains creating spectacular gorges and helping to protect the region's Min heritage. While the journeys are slow here, they're always complimented by staggering panoramas, the landscape veering from scorched sandstone to forested valleys cascading into green rivers. Note that inland Fujian can be easily combined with the mountain districts of Anhui and Jiangxi below.

◦ Mount Wuyi is far less visited than scenic areas in the south of the country, and its staggering mountains are home to serene river journeys, endless tea plantations, and some easy hiking between traditional villages. It's easily the natural highlight of the East Coast.

◦ Recognized by UNESCO, Taining Town offers historical streets of cobblestone amidst dramatic landscapes that wouldn't look out of place in America's great canyon deserts. The area deserves time, particularly as the journey out here can be laborious. Traditional guesthouses offer good value and dozens of people offer walks and river trips into the surrounding area.

◦ Yongding Country is where the diversity of China's cultural heritage is really on display. Round hakka earth houses, clans living in 300 year old houses, unusual language, and always a warm welcome to visitors seeking to explore another of China's almost forgotten histories.

Heading into the Mountains

Dramatically surging from the landscape, the granite mountains of the East make for some adventures most think are reserved to much further West. This is a place for hikers and cultural explorers, somewhere that can easily lull you into spending a couple of weeks. Transport between destinations is sometimes slow, but there's always generally a quick connection to the places directly on the coast.

• Directly west of Shanghai and connected by high speed train, Anhui Province is dissected by the Yangtze and a good stop on trips heading into Central China.
◦ A series of steep mountains rise uninhibitedly in Huangshan (known in English as Yellow Mountain). They're often coated in mist and peeking through from the clouds. It's a surreal expanse of green clinging to granite and a dramatic change from being in Shanghai. This is one of China's best hiking destinations, and without hiking, you'll struggle to get around (something that is doing wonders for preserving the area).
◦ The Haungshan range heads south and connects to Lin'an, 40 kms later. A hiking trail connects the two with hiker's hostels on route. It takes two to three days to complete.
◦ Two World Heritage cities in Southern Anhui are an immersion in traditional China. Preserved but not refurbished, Xidi and Hongkun are both pedestrianized and take you on journeys through narrow alleys of cobblestone and allure. Xidi is less popular and therefore recommended.
• From Anhui, the mountains continue south to Jiangxi, emanating in an equally
hypnotic mix of mist shrouded rocks and fairytale villages.
◦ Sanqingshan Mount is this region's hiker's paradise, full of weaving trails and dazzling panoramas. With similar scenery as Yellow Mountain, its accessible base is the town Shangrao. You'll struggle to find a more spectacular mountain in China. Those with more time can explore in the surrounding Yushan County, something that will appeal to all keen hikers.
◦ The area around Mount Lushan is equally beautiful but its World Heritage status comes from being one of the old spiritual centers of China. Dozens of Buddhist and Taoist temples can be found on the edges of cliffs, some of them filled with barefoot monks. While the famous temples are the more impressive, the atmosphere of the region is best found in the remote areas not connected by cable car. While you're here, also check out Lushan Waterfalls.
◦ Yichun is another spiritual center full of Zen temples, and its relative remoteness makes it decidedly quiet. A place to come for those seeking an escape from China.
◦ Gangzhou (not to be confused with Guangzhou) is the southernmost of the historical towns to explore. While it's not as inherently pretty as the others,

the locals are famously welcoming and laid-back, making it a good overnight stop.

Chapter 7: Hong Kong & South China

Hong Kong and the South is China for beginners. The barriers of communication are minimal and the culture is an almost halfway house between East and West. This makes it a good starting point for anyone a little fearful of the Chinese experience, as well as an easy way to glimpse China without having to commit everything including the kitchen sink.

Hong Kong's skyscrapers stand above narrow streets of tradition, the former British colony emanating an alluring mixture of the West and the East. Parts look irrevocably Chinese, yet it's obvious that you crossed a frontier somewhere. Nearby Macau island has a Portuguese history, a fascinating old town mixing with dozens of opulent casinos looking to rival Vegas. On the mainland, South China is highly developed, filled with towering cities and prosperity. The capital of this is Guangzhou, from where it's just a quick hop to Hong Kong.

This region was a traditional economic powerhouse and second or third generations Chinese expats around the world predominantly come from here. You mainly come here for the cities, each of them with its own distinct flavor. But like most of China, it's only a quick hop into beautiful natural sights, particularly those around Guilin. With its tropical climate, South China can really dazzle and you're never far from a trip into weird and wonderful landscapes.

Practical Information

Getting Here: Guangzhou is the major airport city and transport hub in the south of mainland China. From here there are high speed trains across the region.

A tunnel connects mainland China to Hong Kong and the distance is so short you'll hardly notice you've been through it. Most train services will drop you at the customs gate, which is a short hop by metro to downtown. Going by train is far less problematic than hiring a taxi to take you across. Macau is reached by public ferry from either the mainland or Hong Kong.

Hong Kong and Macau both have large international airports. The cheapest and quickest means of heading to the downtown area is with the dedicated

airport trains. It's better than haggling for a taxi price and then getting stuck in traffic.
Getting Around: Trains offer high speed connections in the center and east of this region. Moving further west you may need local buses. Hong Kong has an excellent metro system and is surprisingly small, making journeys quick and easy.
The Best of Hong Kong Hong Kong is one of the most densely packed places on the planet, every building seeming to rise 20 stories above roads barely wide enough for two passing vehicles. Most sidewalks are chocked full of people, meaning you always have to walk at the crowd's pace. Such annoyance inevitably tests the patience. However, that's counteracted by Hong Kong's colonial history and westernization. This is the place where you can make yourself understood, party in western styled bars, and eat something that doesn't require chopsticks. It's a fascinating place and most of the main sights can be seen in three days. However, having a break from the mainland means many travelers stay for longer.
• Hong Kong's iconic sight is its skyline, one that's on par with the great cityscapes from around the world. In the day, the skyscrapers can look a little aged, although their density is something to behold. When night falls they put on phantasmal light displays, turning everywhere around Victoria Harbor into a performance of illuminations. Good views can be had anywhere around the harbor but the ultimate viewpoint is Victoria Peak, the city's highest point. Come before dusk and you can enjoy daytime views onto the islands before the nightly show. Tsim Sha Tsui Promenade is a closer spot for selfies with the lights. The new sky100 Hong Kong Observation Deck has great views but overpriced considering the peak is free.
• Exploring the life between the skyscrapers is equally entertaining, especially in the
evenings. You'll find hundreds of jewelry shops, junk stores, takeaways, and electronics markets, each emitting a further dose of LED madness. Simply walking around Kowloon City, Central or Mongkok and trying to take it all in is what Hong Kong is all about.
• Hong Kong has hundreds of markets, each selling just about everything you could

ever imagine; Buddhist memorabilia, live chickens, plastic, more plastic, lanterns, etc. Stanley Market is the largest and most famous; good if you just want a peak about what the markets are all about. If you're seriously shopping then the smaller markets around Mongkok are cheaper. Another option for shopping like the locals is Sham Shui Po.

• Hong Kong's diverse history and colonial leftovers are mostly found in Stanley, a
suburb that's easy to explore without any idea of where you're going. With so many skyscrapers as potential compass points, Hong Kong is a good place to get lost in.

• A variety of religious monuments are sprinkled across the city. Chi Lin Nunnery
has the classically evocative facade of sloping roofs that grabs your attention, and an atmosphere of intimacy that comes unexpected when you enter. Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery can't decide if it's a spiritual center or kitsch plastic toyland; certainly one of the most unusual monasteries to see in China. For the iconic photo, visit the Big Buddha, essentially just a massive Buddha statue but impressive nevertheless. To get there, take the cable car for some stunning views. Po Lin Monastery is another glimpse into Buddhism.

• Join the locals and flutter your money away at Happy Valley Racecourse, a place
of many celebratory drinks and despairing wails.

• A few city parks offer a partial escape from the fumes and crowds. Most interesting
in Kowloon Park, bang in the middle of the action and littered with artistic graffiti. Nan Lian Garden and Hong Kong Park are as peaceful. Sundays are always a good time to visit the parks. This is when the city's domestic workers come out to socialize together, hundreds of them taking Tupperware boxes of food and hanging out in the parks. Another place of solitude is St. John's Cathedral.

• Hong Kong the country is actually a series of islands, most of them tiny and offering a complete change of pace to the chaos of Hong Kong Island. Step on a ferry at Victoria Harbor and the frenzy of the city seems to disappear almost immediately. Lantua, Cheung Chau and Lamma Islands have some beautiful beaches and easy hikes to green look out points. Each

has a traditional village-cum-harbor which immediately presses an impression of heritage and temples rather than skyscrapers. You'll find good street food and sunbathing in all three of these.

• The popular islands make for great excursions outside of summer and Christmas / New Year. During peak season they can be overrun with tourists, somewhat taking away the natural charm. But with 500 islands to choose from there's no need to stick with the three popular favorites. Check ferry schedules because some of the following only have one ferry a day.

◦ Remote Tung Ping Chau is a protected marine park of kaleidoscopic rock and snorkeling adventures.

◦ Po Toi is equally charming with its landscapes and serene vibe.

◦ Tap Mun has some excellent temples and quiet beaches.

◦ Yim Tin Tsai has a spooky abandoned Hakka village and the island for those really wanting to get off the beaten track.

• Hong Kong is huge on theme parks that get children excited and parents crying at

the credit card statement. Hong Kong Disneyland is the obvious one with Ocean Park the marine angle on expensive entrance tickets. A free way of copycat American entertainment is Avenue of the Stars, a bit like what you'll find in Hollywood except with odes to Jackie Chan et al.

• Just like its London namesake, Soho is a trendy neighborhood of bars and restaurants for a night out. Many of the big hotels have opulent bars on their top floors, but there's more atmosphere to be found in Soho.

A Journey Across Guangdong Guangdong and its capital Guangzhou is at a crossroads between the coastal development and the beauty of China's mountains. While factories spill fumes and cities grow and grow, the evidence of old culture is easy to find. And despite being China's most populous region, you're rarely far from a surreal natural sight. In short, this region combines the nature and rurality of the West with the development of the East. The problem is finding these alluring contrasts when there's so many skyscrapers and factories around. The following experience are listed from east to west.

• Eastern Guangdong has little of inherent interest. Shantou is the major coastal city but any dreams of beaches are gobbled up by billowing smoke. This is a special economic zone, meaning its heavily focused on business travelers.

• The Pearl River Delta is Guangdong and China's major economic hub outside
Shanghai. This is where a huge proportion of China's exports come from and it's not always the prettiest place. But money means some high-end experiences. Overlooking the bay to Hong Kong, Shenzhen makes for an intriguing contrast to the island. The buildings are just as high and the streets just as entertaining, except it's all hypermodern Chinese culture rather than glimpses of colonialism.
• You're likely to pass through Guangzhou, the region's capital, when traveling in
South China. The mountain backdrop provides an iconic sight, before your eyes are pulled to the rapidly ascending skyline. Like Hong Kong, the skyscrapers put on flashing light shows in the evenings. Many people come to dine and drink in this futuristic downtown area. Canton Tower is the highest in all of China and the observation deck offers the expectant great views. Another way to watch the skyline show is on a Pearly River Night Cruise, something that can also include a vast buffet.
• But Guangzhou is also one of China's oldest cities and the historic landmarks can
be found all around the original city center. Yuexiu district has 2200 years of history, including the Guangzhou Museum and half a dozen preserved temples. This is an easy area to explore on foot. In between the relics, the wholesale markets of Yide Road and Baima are atmospheric haggling at its best. Liwan scents of Guangzhou's colonial past and the highlight is usually the Xiguan Old Houses. While Tianhe suburb is impossibly futuristic, look between the glass and you'll find the chaotic crumbling suburb of Shipai, a good place for people watching and seeing what life used to be like here. Throughout this area you'll also see the remains of upper class Qing dynasty life. The Xiguan houses are mainly seen on Duobao Road and Longjin West Road, each the Chinese version of a European Renaissance townhouse.
• It's easy to get distracted by the lights in Guangzhou. But the city has some of
China's best pedestrian streets, shopping thoroughfares that blend the old and new of the country. In particular, try Beijing Lu, Shangxiajiu, and Taikoo Hui.

• Guangzhou has an excellent metro system which makes the city's main sites easily visited in one day. Head to Shamian Island for an escape from the bustle and look at its time as a British and French concession. Close to University City, Xiaozhou Village is a utopia for students that's gradually getting torn down in place of factories. Ride to Huang Pu Gu Gang for some cheap street food and a hutong style mix of old buildings and tea shops. History buffs like the Guanzhou Uprising Museum (China's first communist government building) and the free Guangdong Museum, a chance to see the whole of South China in a couple of exhibit filled hours.
• Jiangmen is one of the most pleasant of Guangdong's cities. While the buildings still rise high, the river and forested slopes provide a more natural edge to the landscape. Huizhou is equally likable, the West Lake and Xunliao Bay making a tranquil break from the urban chaos all around.
• Gazing out at Macau, Zhuhai bucks the travel trend in the Pearl River Delta. The
river winds through undulating hills of green, hiding temples and mountain retreats that offer escapes if you can afford the price. Likewise, Dongguan (bordering Guangzhou) takes you into the mountains and some impressive natural scenes.
• Inland from Guangzhou, the Northern Guangdong area is where industry meets
with nature. Train connections are excellent and quickly transport you into forested mountains.
◦ The most obvious stop is the first one you reach in the mountains. Qingyuan is a very popular day trip from Guangzhou, made locally famous for its man-made dingy rafting. Essentially, it's a huge cement slope, a cross between the world's longest water slide and actual white-water rafting. A more enchanting stop is the Old Village, a well preserved place of waterways and traditional buildings. Follow the waters to Feilai Temple, 14 centuries old and radiating spirituality. A series of natural attractions complete the day trip, including the Underground River and Feixia Scenic Area.
◦ Wanlu Lake is actually artificial, but that doesn't stop if from being anything less impressive. An easy escape from Guangzhou.
◦ Surrounded by the rain forest, Heyuan is like a historic postcard...from certain angles. The evidence of industry is starting to invade, but right now,

this small city enables you to getaway.

◦ Liannen and Meizhou are jumping off points for exploring the minority clans of the area. Yao and Hakka people live here and the relics of their culture are found in tourist focused traditional villages, and the harder to find, actual villages.

• On the coast heading towards Vietnam, Zhanjiang is a kind of Eastern Dubai,
towering glass skyscrapers meeting with beaches and tropical waters.

A Journey Across Guangxi Guangxi is a vast contrast to the rest of South China, a relatively poor area with spectacular natural attractions. The geology has always served as a cultural and geographic barrier to the rest of the region, meaning money never filtered this way west. Three major tourist bases form the core of the experience, mostly taking you into the north of the province. Each can be seen in a busy day. But soaking up the beauty normally extends over a few relaxed days of landscapes and local villages.

• Guilin is one of China's most scenic destinations, a largely traditional place built
around a dramatic karst landscape.

◦ The jaw dropping backdrop is usually enough to keep people entertained. River cruises are the way to really savor it, wooden crafts taking you around the city or further into the mountains. For the best panoramic views, take the cable car up to Guilin Yaoshan Mountain Scenic Resort. Some good hiking can be found up here as Guilin spills into Yaoshan Country.

◦ Exploring the green clad karsts can easily take up a few days. Guangxi Guilin Forest Part offers panoramas and tough hiking. Folded Brocade Hill is another for ascending and then marveling at the view. Highest and most challenging, Guangxi Maoer Mountain Reserve is also the most sublime due its lack of local tourists.

◦ Throughout Guilin you'll find some fabulous landscaped gardens, each elevating the natural surroundings. Liu Sanjie and Guilin Botanical Garden are both extremely pretty. Another garden type attraction is Guanyan Scenic Resort, which erroneously claims to have the world's biggest cave, but is impressive nonetheless.

• Guilin backs onto Longsheng Country, a very traditional area of dazzling rice
paddies and villages.

◦ The main attraction are the iconic rice terraces themselves. You can't miss them. They spill down each steep mountain, rolling north with vivacious green color. The Dragon's Backbone Rice Terraces are the most surreal and the centerpiece of tourism in the area. However, there are postcard perfect photos to be add from many angles.
◦ This is a hiker's area, filled with treks to ancient villages and never ending views. Longji Mountain is the focal point for trips.
◦ A series of villages are attempting to preserve local life, in a very pushy Chinese tourism kind of way. Longji Tea House and Plantation and Jin Zhu Zhuang Nationality Village are slightly fake but come with splendid views.
• On the other side of Guilin is Yangshuo Country, a third glorious expanse of vistas
and tradition.
◦ Gently float down the Yulong River, the karsts neatly reflected in the water as you journey through a world of green. Rafting and tubing trips are offered along the river. Yangshuo Park is the region's most tourist promoted natural area, so while it's beautiful, you may prefer somewhere without the crowds. Another popular local choice is Yuanshuo Historic Landscape Park.
◦ A couple of mountains make for outstanding day hikes: Guilin Laozhai Mountain, Moon Hill, and Xianggong Mountain. All are relatively quiet and stupendously scenic.
◦ Yuangshuo's traditional villages are more authentic than Longsheng and are places where you can still find locals haggling in markets and genuinely old buildings (not new ones looking like old ones). Fuli is a good morning trip and Xingping has the whiffs of fisher history. Jiuxian Ancient Village is an archaeological site and no longer inhabited.

Chapter 8: Xian & the Central Regions

Central China is a treasure trove of history, the place where Chinese civilization was born and where it continues to be defined. From the Terracotta Warriors to the cute streets of Pingyao, this chapter covers some of the country's most unusual and sublime attractions. However, the smog from coal mining and factories burns through the air, giving the region a somewhat ugly facade. There's little nature to find here and most names on the map are little more than mushrooming industrial towns. But nobody comes here for nature. They come here for ancient China in its unadulterated glory; temples, towns, ancient capitals, and the remains of forgotten dynasties. There more historical sites here than anywhere else in the country, something which makes it hard to keep off any itinerary.
This chapter covers the China regions of Shanxi, Shaanxi, Hubei, and Hunan.

Practical Information

Getting Here: While the central regions have a number of large well-connected cities, these are predominantly industrial and not the nicest introduction to history. The exception is Xian, capital of 13 dynasties, home of 73 emperors, and recently connected to Beijing and Shanghai by high speed train. Xian airport is also well connected domestically. Another option for getting here is the inland rail journey from Beijing, offering a huge range of places worth stopping at.
Getting Around: With the long distances, trains are the obvious way to travel. Most are scheduled to go overnight, minimizing travel time and saving on accommodation costs.

Beijing to Xian

• Henan Province was the birthplace of Chinese civilization and was home of
Chinese emperors for 3300years, from the Xia Dynasty in 21st century B.C. to the Song Dynasty in 12th century A.D. Not much remains and the province is now vastly over-polluted and one of the most densely populated

places on the planet. However, there are some fascinating finds to discover in the seven ancient capitals of China. With public transport allow a day for each, but pick and choose, as this dirty and polluted area is not especially pretty on the eye.

◦ Virtually ruined but still clinging to its glory as an ancient capital, Anyang has two great attractions. The Yin Ruins showcase some of the earliest ever written language, the symbols scribed onto turtle shells around the foundations of the old Shang capital. Just outside the town, Yaoli Townlet has a layer of culture that dates back to King Wen and his battles with King Zhou. Many historians say this is the true birth place of Chinese culture but you need a local guide to decipher most of it.

◦ Zhengzhou, like Beijing, hides a lot of attractions amongst modernity. See the Dynasty Wall, Shaolin Temple, and Northern Song Dynasty Imperial Tombs. Its best stop is the Henan Provincial Museum, a real treasure trove of information about the area. Zhengzhou is Henan's cultural hub, making it practically the defacto historic hub of China.

◦ The ancient capital with the most sights, Luoyang is famous worldwide for the Longmen Grottoes, vast caverns and caves filled with sculpted Buddhas. Peeking out from beneath cliffs, the grottoes are one of China's great treasures, the statuesque faces rising over 50 feet in the gloomy caves. The whole Longmen area is a national park and requires most of a day on its own. On route to the grottoes, the Guanlin Temple is a vast complex of rooms dedicated to great warrior Guan Yu. Luoyang's third essential sight is the White Horse Temple, one of the oldest Buddhist temples in the world.

◦ One of China's oldest imperial capitals, Luoyang still dances to the rhythm of the Song dynasty. The Luoyang Museum is filled with porcelain and artifacts from the Zhou dynasty, while the Ancient Ham Tombs Museum stands above the relics of the Northern Song Dynasty. Both fascinate archaeologists. Beneath the city, the Emperor Carriage Museum is a much smaller version of an underground army than the Terrecotta Warriors.

◦ Dengfeng's forests of pagodas and Shaolin Temple seem to come straight from a movie set, taking you on a journey into a version of China that's been idolized in old kung fu films. While the different temples are wonderfully idyllic, they get busy so arrive early for photos of the pagoda forests before the crowds arrive. A number of kung fu companies offer shows but they're not particularly good value.

◦ Songshan is a renowned world center for kung fu, the martial art founded in its Shaolin Temple. It's a haven for kung fu enthusiasts although it's getting increasingly difficult to separate the genuine historic schools from the cashing-in variety.

• Slightly west of Henan, Shangxi Province is well populated and home to some of

China's most endearing sights and destinations. The region was the birthplace of three historic kings, and each built his own capital. Many visitors choose either Shangxi or Henan; Shangxi has a better developed tourist infrastructure while Henan is slightly more rugged and unchanged.

◦ Datong offers the first glimpse at the region's antiquity, where the 1500 year old Yungang Grottoes feature over 50,000 Buddha statues. One is 56-foot high, some barely taller than an inch. Various caves are guarded by wooden temples. An iconic second day of sightseeing first takes in the Hanging Monastery, an ancient complex precipitously clinging to a cliff and full of mid-air walkways. Then continue to China's oldest wooden structure, the simple but beautiful Yingxian Pagoda.

◦ Some ruined sections of the Great Wall of China can be found here, the most accessible being along the Yellow River near Datong. Hostels can organize tours.

◦ Coated in a blanket of charm, Pingyao is a delightfully preserved ancient city. The pedestrianized streets are lined with antique stores and shimmering temples, while many of the old buildings have been converted into historic hotels. Pingyao is a place for wandering and getting lost, the stone walls crumbling and the smell of local life coming from backstreets. It has the rare gift of being open and developed for tourism, but not overdeveloped and leaning towards the local tourist market. If the batteries need recharging, this is an enchanting place to do so.

◦ Combining natural and cultural sights, Linfen has enough sights to keep visitors occupied for a few days. Overlooked by the Huoshan Mountain, Guangsheng Temple dates back 1800 years and is exquisitely sculpted. Most come to photo the iconic Feihong Pagoda, but in the corner of the complex there are some wonderful relics from both Yuan and Ming dynasties. Far older (some 4300 years), Yao Temple has been renovated through the dynasties and offers an overview of Chinese history. Local guides are excellent and the photos from here are wonderfully alien.

Nearby, China's second biggest waterfall, Hukou is a rushing blur of turbulent water throwing off clouds of mist.

◦ As you creep closer to Xian, Yungcheng has two fabulous artistic treasures. Yongle Temple is the largest Yuan temple remaining, each of its halls covered by vibrant murals and Taoist paintings. Dedicated to the God of War, Guan Di Temple is an equally vast complex of gardens, temples, pagodas, and palace rooms. Head through the gates and indulge in what is a quiet and peaceful ancient Chinese temple.

Xian Xian seems to symbolize the best and worst of the Chinese travel experience. The odes to antiquity are on a spectacular scale; this was the Chinese capital for over 1000 years, a period spanning 13 dynasties and 73 emperors. As the eastern terminus of the Old Silk Road is was once the richest city in the world and exemplars of this medieval wealth are everywhere. However, sometimes the view of the immense city walls is blurred by smog as Xian gets lost in a vastly populated region. Despite the large numbers of tourists, you'll still see locals spitting all over the streets. Some say China is a place you either love or hate. Xian is somewhere most people love and hate. The good news is that Xian is also a major transport terminus and extremely easy to incorporate into any itinerary.

• The world's largest, the City Walls of Xian stretch many miles around the old part

of town, every few hundred meters featuring a new battlement or tower. It's an ideal introduction to the town, best explored by hiring a bike and cycling around the top of the wall (the walls are around ten meters wide). A remarkable piece of medieval splendor, the walls have a history dating back 1400 years, revealed in the museum at Hanguang Gate.

• Another excellent overview of Xian and its surroundings is the Shaanxi Historic

Museum, stuffed full of bronze and pottery from through the dynasties. Some over- the-top movies try and recreate history but they're not required given the sheer numbers of artifacts on display.

• Inside the city walls you'll find most of Xian's sublime markers of history, all toured

on one relatively easy day. Walking through the old town is part of the attraction, especially when you escape the main thoroughfares and wander off down side- streets that retain their ancient intrigue and temptation.

◦ Beiyuanmen Street is the one for eating locally and watching the world go by, flanked by cheap eats and dumpling stalls.
◦ To really enjoy the old town, look for a hostel inside the city walls.
◦ The wall is dotted with gates, towering entrance posts you must walk under. Glowing in the dark and curving skyward, the South Gate is the most impressive for old Xian photos.
◦ China's first ever, the Grand Mosque is hidden down a couple of winding alleys and evokes the influence on China through Silk Road trading. It's located in the Muslim Quarter, probably the most interesting of the old town's districts. Come here in the late afternoon for some fun scenes on the streets and some strange local food.
◦ The Drum Tower and Bell Tower are unmissable, great concoctions of old stone that tower above everything. They make for iconic photos of China's heritage. Two other emblems of the city are the Big Goose Pagoda and Little Goose Pagoda, both with fountains that light up in the evening and play strange shows. Dayan Pagoda does a similar evening show of fountains and flashing lights, somewhat taking away from the feel and style of old Xian.
◦ Xian's temples have been well restored and are easy to include into a day of historic musing. Wolong Temple is the most impressive but busiest, while Eight Immortals Temple has a greater sense of its original times.
◦ Some 2,300 stone tables can be found in the Forest of Steles, each inscribed with some of the first examples of the written Chinese language.
• A day trip from Xian, the Army of Terracotta Warriors and Horses is in the highest echelons of must see Chinese attractions. Only discovered 30 years ago, the 8000+ life sized warriors were buried to protect the tomb of emperor Qin ShiHuang. All have remarkably intricate detail, including individualized facial features and hair styles which follow you across the three pits. Some pull chariots, there's some terracotta horses, and most warriors grip thin air as their wooden swords have disintegrated. Ignore the crowds. The scale of the Terracotta Warriors is breathtaking, three vaults packed with this statuesque army. From a distance its remarkable. Then you get closer and get lost in the detail. Including in the ticket is entrance to the Qin ShiHuang Mausoleum, as is the gold shuttle bus to get there. Still being excavated, it's another relic on an astoundingly large scale. You can take

public transport to the warriors from Xian train station and all hostels offer good value tours.

• Less famous, but also stuffed with various protectors, Mao Ling Mausoleum and

Qian Ling Mausoleum are interesting stops if you have more than a few days in Xian. More bizarre, the Tomb of Emperor Jingdi is guarded by 50,000 doll sized terracotta figures, and a whole menagerie of sculpted animals. It's the off the beaten track and rarely visited Xian attraction.

• Now connected by high speed train, Huashan Mountain is one of China's most

sacred and cable cars takes you up to the North and West Peaks. On a clear day the views are astonishing, especially on the three to four hour walk around the mountain's four peaks.

South of Xian

The most popular onward journey from Xian is to take the overnight train to Chengdu without stopping anywhere on route. Especially if you've traveled through the northern of these central regions, it's more than tempting to beeline straight for the hills of Sichuan and Chengdu. Another popular option is the overnight and direct journey to the Chongqing region.

However, there's still some historic delight to find south of Xian. A trip through Hubei and Hunan is one of China's most unexpected treats. With glorious and understated scenery, this route crosses the Yangtze and meets with the mountains of Guilin and Guanxi. As with the rest of this chapter, picking a small selection of destinations is recommended. They're all well connected to each other and listed north to south.

• Tai Chi was born in the Wudang Mountain Range, a UNESCO World Heritage Site

that's dappled with meandering clouds of mist. From the access town of Wudangshan, an hour long bus journey takes you to Nanyan in the park, where the English speaking tourist information dispense maps. There's a whole host of temples that double as martial arts schools, each fulfilling all reverie of learning an Eastern art in an almost mythically rural setting. In addition, a number of excellent day hikes take you to the green peaks.

• Formed of two ancient cities, Xiangyang is a haven of historical attractions, many
of them on a similar scale to Xian. It was a capital in the Three Kingdoms era and the sight of running battles with the Mongol Empire.
◦ Although not as long as Xian's, the ancient city wall towers well above the rest of the city, the stone fortress topped with gilded pagodas. Coming here first gives a good overview of the city.
◦ Tucked into the corners of the city wall, the Drum and Bell Tower and Zhongxuan Tower are as impressive as those in Xian but with a tiny fraction of the visitors.
◦ Deng Ancient City really looks ancient, the stone crumbling and seeming to drop into the narrow archways. The Migong Temple and Duobau Pagoda are also poignant markers of the past. A few freelance guides hang around the entrances to Xiangyang attractions and can be good value and good entertainment as they breathe stories into the stone.
• The great Yangtze River dissects the region of Hubei and it's along this river that
the region's great attraction is found.
◦ At Yichang, the world's largest dam - Three Gorges Dam – is a mass of impressive concrete and steel. The scale is phenomenal and has many budding engineers shaking their head in disbelief.
◦ The dam has flooded the world's third longest river, with detrimental affect on thousands of flooded villages and the Three Gorges area. This sublime gorge area was one of China's great natural highlights and day or overnight cruises continue to take you through the area. However, there's better Yangtze scenery to be found in Sichuan province (chapter 9). Since the dam, the Three Gorges is a fraction of its former splendor.
• Wuhan's excellent transport connections make it a popular stop. Hubei's capital is surprisingly peaceful and charming, sprawling across the Han and Yangtze Rivers and full of green views.
◦ Donghu National Park and East Lake can be glorious on a clear day; both are close to the city and a serene opportunity to spend an afternoon. However, when the smog is heavy, Mulan Heaven Lake and Donghu Scenic Resort are more picturesque.
◦ Rising high above the city, the curved golden pagodas of Yellow Crane Tower are an iconic sight, especially when they glisten after dusk. The

tower acts as a compass throughout your stay, as does the Wuhan Yangtze River Bridge, another impressive feat of engineering.

◦ Wuhan's traditional streets are full of atmosphere and strange smells. Head down Hubu Alley and the crowds move through thousands of food vendors selling all manner of weird and wonderful classics. Chu River Han Street is another good place for an ambient evening, the full range of modern Chinese culture (good and bad) on display.

• Barely an hour from Wuhan, the little city of Ezhou is almost China in a manageable nutshell. You'll find many temples, the best of them perched above green hills with excellent views. The markets run into the evening and have an endearing atmosphere. There are more impressive places to visit, but Ezhou's low- key vibe is inherently appealing.

• Jingzhou is another relatively impressive walled city, although after Xian and
Xiangyang there is a feeling of overkill.

• As you move south from the Yangtze you enter Hunan, birthplace of Chairman Mao yet virtually unseen by foreign tourists. The mountains get steeper here, cladded with forest as they roll into the karsts of Guilin . Travel here requires patience and an intrepid spirit, but it has many off the beaten track rewards:

◦ Shaoshan was Mao's birthplace, and while it's not an especially pretty town, the destination revels in its dedication to the former Communist leader. You'll find many places to buy his little red book of quotations.

◦ Hunan's capital and transport hub is Changsha, home to an almost bizarre conglomeration of architecture. The Yeulu Academy, Tianxin Tower, and Hunan Provincial Museum are classical impressions of the past. Then they're juxtaposed with glass facades of the Changsha Museum and the Changsha Window of the World. Many visitors tend to stay longer than intended in this intriguing city.

◦ Rolling along the river, Fengshuang is one of China's most picturesque historic towns. Yet to be oversaturated with tourism, it offers a quaint immersion in traditional life and dazzling historic buildings, along with some iconic journeys by boat.

◦ Shaoyang is another of Hunan's understated historic delights, tucked away in the south and offering a look at tradition for visitors disenchanted by the rest of China.

◦ A World Heritage Site, the sandstone peaks and forests of Zhangjiajie are a relatively accessible and picturesque setting for those seeking a way from the smog.
◦ Less accessible but home to a stunning landscape of sandstone karsts, the Wulingyuan Mountain is an area of hiking trails and cable cars across precipitous cliffs of green.

Chapter 9: Chengdu & South-Central China

The Yangtze River tumbles down from the Himalayas, leaving a laid-back atmosphere and trail of green on the mountains' foothills. Combining iconic attractions with natural reverie and a warm welcome, South-central China is the version of China that exists in many preconceptions, the one that never leaves a bad taste in the mouth. From Tibetan towns and river adventures to pandas and intensely spicy food, South-central China has its own flavor. It's the region that blurs modern China into valleys of enticement and tradition. It's also the region that offers the most complete overview of the full Chinese experience; futuristic samples, lots of tradition, minority cultures, wild nature, and getting to know the locals.

This chapter covers the Chinese provinces of Sichuan and Chongqing.

Practical Information

Getting Here: Chengdu, capital of Sichuan, has excellent transport connections by rail and air. One of China's most easygoing cities, Chengdu is a central point from which to make an adventure. Chongqing also has great transport links, however, it's one of the world's biggest cities and not always an easy introduction.

Getting Around: The region's topography dictates how you travel. In a nutshell, head east or north from Chengdu and the country's railways provide efficient connections. Go west or south and you must wind into the mountains on beautiful journeys taken by dilapidated local buses.

Chengdu Surrounded by fertile plains, Chengdu is a dreamy city, exuding an atmosphere of tranquility that belies the fact it's got a 10million plus population. It's one of the few Chinese cities that are eminently enjoyable when you do nothing. It doesn't require attractions. You could easily spend a week here, enjoying the atmosphere, exploring, and absorbing the friendly atmosphere. As it is, there's more than enough to occupy visitors for up to week.

• In the green mountain foothills, an hour out of town, the Giant Panda Breeding Research Base (insert your own joke about the infertility of pandas here) is the easiest place in the country for encounters with the big

cuddly bears. The pandas are in large pens, doing little but chomping on bamboo. There's over 20 of them, as well as the more active red pandas and a few other animals scurrying around. For around $150 you can sit on a panda's lap for a photo; the bears aren't sedated, they really are this docile.

• Three hours east of Chengdu, Wolong Panda Reserve is a more rugged day of

entertainment with the big bears. Receiving barely 5% of the tourist numbers as the breeding base, it's much easier and cheaper to get close and interact with the pandas. Get local information before going though; the reserve was damaged by a 2008 earthquake and not all the pandas have returned from their temporary residences elsewhere in Sichuan.

• Leshan is a real tick-list attraction. According to the tourism board, this is the

world's largest Buddha. It's certainly impressive, over 100meters high and sculpted serenely into a mountain. But come here because you're genuinely interested, rather than tick off the world's biggest Buddha...because it's really only the world's largest stone carved seated Buddha. Nearby Mount Emie is also a World Heritage Site, a sacred Buddhist place dotted with temples and Buddha sculptures. It's advisable to visit the mountain first, then see the Leshan Buddha in the late afternoon when all the Chinese tour buses have left.

• Chengdu is a city for enjoying the streets, and this is best shown in

Kuanzhaixiangzi, an area of tea shops, local snacks, and Qing dynasty buildings. Filled with restaurants and a mix of shopping arcades, Chunxi Road is another that blends the history and modernity of China. More traditional, Songxian Qiao Antique Market sells every kind of communist relic you can imagine, as well as some bargain antiques. Jinli Pedestrian Street is full of shops selling tourist junk but still has a likable charm.

• Another great people watching base is Tianfu Square, dominated by an immense Chairman Mao statue and synchronized fountain and music displays during the evenings. Slightly greener (and funnier with all the mass tai chi exercises going on), People's Park is another easy place to spend a few hours.

• Sichuan opera, a kind of burlesque cabaret with various performers, is a national icon and there are dozens of places to watch a show. Expect dancing, shadow puppets, Chinese comedy, colorful costumes, and the

remarkable art of face changing (a bizarre magic act). The larger opera houses are tourist focused and more expensive. However, a number of tea shops put on more authentic shows for locals. The hostels are excellent sources of information and can book tickets.

• Another local institution is the Sichuan hotpot. Essentially, you receive a boiling vat of chili oil and dip in your selection of meats and vegetables (much like a fondue except insanely spicy). Yulinchuanchuanxiang is the cheap chain variety but there's localized hotpot restaurants on almost every street.

• Chengdu's temples are both charming and traditional. While the actual buildings are not as big as elsewhere, Wenshu Temple and Qingyang Temple are set in vast grounds filled with locals drinking tea and playing chess. Cheap entrance tickets make both these places serene places to relax. Baoguang Temple is also recommended.

• Outrageously futuristic and glimmering all night long, the New Century Global Center is the world's largest building. It's far from enchanting and there's huge areas of empty space as the government tries to fill the mass of shopping space. There's also a waterpark and cinema inside, as well as a Chinese food court on a surreally large scale.

The Mountains and Tibetan Sichuan

Stretching west from Chengdu are arguably China's most exquisite natural landscapes, the lush green valleys merging into the towering peaks of the Himalayas. This is where the world's highest mountain chain starts and half a dozen minorities live traditionally in the valleys and plateaus. Transport is slow and the region is poor economically. You'll need time and a sense of adventure. If you have it, this is an immensely rewarding experience and alternative Chinese paradigm. This area also offers an opportunity to see genuine Tibetan culture without taking the required government tour to Tibet.

Note that snowfall makes these routes inaccessible during winter. This is usually November to February, although the exact dates shift every year.

• One adventure heads northwest from Chengdu to the Aba Prefecture, an area

that's over 50% ethnically Tibetan. With three World Natural Heritage Sites, Aba is an immersion in stupendous mountain and lake scenery. It's becoming increasingly accessible as new asphalt roads are being constructed:

◦ A day's bus from Chengdu, Songpan is Aba's base for exploring small Tibetan villages. Hostels and guesthouses can organize tours, the most memorable being the multi-day horse treks that head onto the plateau. While you can explore the Tibetan villages on your own, English is rarely spoken and you'll miss out on the invites to drink tea and share meals in locals' homes.

◦ Full of alpine lakes and staggering mountains, Jiuzhaigou County is a paradise for hiking and exploring tiny villages. The Natural Reserve is the most accessible and popular destination, with the gushing water of Shuzheng Valley a close second. Cascading like a veil, Nuorilang Waterfall is another exceptional natural sight, but there are so many in Jiuzhaigou.

◦ Merging with Jiunhaizgou, Huanglong Mountain and the surrounding valleys are liberally sprinkled with mineral pools and little waterfalls. A wooden boardwalk connects many of these colorful pools and some cute temples, making an easy three to four walk through the forest. Longer hikes are also possible.

◦ Peacefully maintaining its equanimity deep in the mountains, Langmusi is a gem of a Tibetan town in northern Sichuan. The day long mountain journey from Jiuzhaigou or Xiahe is a real scenic highlight, often involving an overcrowded local bus lurching around corners with unfenced three kilometer drops to the side. With snowy peaks all around, Langmusi represents a classical image of Tibet. Visit the monastery, go on a horse trek, but mostly, come here to absorb the serenity of authentic Tibet.

◦ Langmusi and Litang (see below) offer opportunities to watch a sky burial. As incense swirls, high-up community members are left on a holy mountain to be devoured by a flock of vultures. In less than an hour nothing is left, the speed of the body returning to the earth making a sky burial the finest possible send off in the Buddhist religion. Foreigners are welcome to watch the ceremony, but don't be offensive and wave the camera around. Join the locals in sitting at a respectful distance. It's also recommended to be accompanied by someone from your guesthouse, and obviously, seeing a sky burial depends on someone from the community recently dying.

◦ An iconic triangle of white and precipitous cliff, Mount Siguniang National Park almost looks like its been transported from the Swiss Alps. Surrounded by flowering valleys yet stark and seemingly impenetrable, it's a place for serious hikers looking to get off the beaten track.

• Heading due west of Sichuan, a long loop of mountain roads is the most adventurous trip through Tibetan Sichuan. It's many people's highlights of China. The trip is dictated by the roads: there's practically only one route through the mountains so the following destinations must be traveled in the order they're presented.

◦ A day west of Chengdu, Kangding is an ideological crossroads between China and Tibet. Nestled along a river in a dramatic valley, the town center shows the Han takeover, with many Chinese restaurants and an increasing level of neon. However, it's compact size and relative quietude still makes it enjoyable. On the outskirts, you'll find many small Buddhist temples and holy sites. These aren't paid temple attractions like elsewhere. They're religious buildings of barefooted monks walking around and welcoming you with a bow of the head.

◦ Continue west and you head high into the Himalayas, the bus curving along narrow mountain roads with astonishing views. Sit on the left for the best photos. It's a full day to Litang, 4000meters above sea level and completely Tibetan. From Litang, one road continues west all the way to Lhasa. It's currently closed to foreigners due to the political situation; however, should it reopen, these five days of connecting Tibetan towns by bus is amongst the world's most spectacular road journeys.

◦ Surrounded by mountains, and rolling around an arid plateau, Litang is an evocative Tibetan town that's recently been shunted out of Tibet as province boundaries have changed. Everything is Tibetan: buildings, monasteries, faces, food, temples, local women washing clothes in the river. Considering its accessibility from Chengdu (just two days), Litang provides the chance to see Tibet without paying through the nose. The whole town is the attraction and many foreigners are invited into homes for food and tea drinking.

◦ In this Ganzi area you'll find many small Tibetan towns but reaching them requires a private taxi and a local guide. The library at Dege and the ruggedness of Ganzi town are the most popular to visit – both are one day

north from Litang. One potential route is to connect Songpan with Ganzi and then head south to Litang.

◦ Kaleidoscopically colorful and practically untrammeled, Daocheng Country is a sublime concoction of alpine scenery and intriguing towns. Half a day south of Litang, Daocheng town is the base for multiple days of hiking in the surrounding mountains. Dotted throughout the hills are small Buddhist monasteries and temples, each ascetic and humble as they occupy glorious positions above forest clad valleys.

◦ As the road winds and weaves it starts to descend again, the next necessary stop being Xiangcheng. Another mixed Tibetan and Han town surrounded by dazzling mountains, Xiangcheng has a lovely atmosphere and a series of temples that can be explored. As tourism to Daocheng increases, the quality of accommodation and amenities is being improved, although the sense of enchantment and rurality remains.

◦ The home of 30% of the world's pandas, Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuary is perhaps the most natural of the region's black and white bear attractions. The pandas are inside fences and you can often get as close as you dare. It's accessible from Xiangcheng.

Chongqing and the Yangtze

Culturally and historically Sichuanese, the Chongqing Province lies to the east of Chengdu. Dissected by the Yangtze and flooded with new industry, the province has fallen off the tourist radar in recent years. That's primarily because Chongqing city has mushroomed into a city of over 20million people, many of them displaced from the flooding made by the Three Gorges Dam.

• Chongqing City is a major transport hub that many travelers will pass through. The
downtown area around the station, although gray and rundown, is pleasant enough and full of cheap eats and accommodation.

• The main attraction is multi-day river cruises that depart Chongqing and heads down the Yangtze. It's a fascinating journey through dramatic gorges and past villages that still cling to the riverbanks. Various boats are available, from cheap local ones to luxurious foreign tourist catered operations. It's generally advisable to pay a little extra for the comfort.

• Despite the rather ugly facade, the locals are always upbeat and a journey here has
a certain understated charm. You'll encounter unadulterated Chinese culture in all its forms; from sitting in parks, quaffing down strange meals in restaurants, and meeting strangers.

Chapter 10: Southwest China inc Kunming

Cascading out of the Tibetan Mountains and vibrantly coated in green and red, Southwest China is the region most suited for backpacker travel and offbeat adventures. While it's undeniably Chinese, there's also a strong sense of Southeast Asia's exoticism as well as the overlap of Tibetan culture from the mountains. Southwest China is more akin to traveling in northern Laos and Thailand than traveling in ChinaThe experience is less about sightseeing and more about absorbing local culture, the region offering an exquisite natural backdrop for intrepid journeys and lazy days in cute mountain villages. Transport is slow, smiles are ubiquitous, and many a traveler came for three days and stayed a month. If time is on your side, this could easily be your favorite region in China.
This chapter covers the province of Yunnan.

Practical Information

Getting Here: Quaint Kunming is the region's capital and most accessible entry point. It has excellent rail and air connections to most major cities in China, as well as to all destinations within the region. If coming from Sichuan or Guilin and the far south, it's not necessary to arrive in Kunming. Easy road connections take you destinations listed in the itinerary section below. Guiyang is the capital of Guizhou and the region's other comparable transport hub.
Getting Around: As tourism increases here, rail and air travel is starting to feature on itineraries. Dali and Lijiang both now have airports and train stations with connections to Kunming. Guiyang also has a small web of train connections, but outside these destinations, transport is always by road. Small buses weave through the hills, taking beautiful but often crowded journeys. For the remote destinations and treks, private taxis are far quicker and can be good value if you are in a group.
The Iconic Southwest China Trail from Kunming This first itinerary combines the region's three most accessible destinations, offering a great overview of the nature and historic towns on offer; Kunming, Shilin, Dali, and Lijiang. It's the classic Southwest China route and the typical trail of

tour groups (both local and international). Note that the popularity makes it very busy during summer.

• Tropical Kunming is one of China's least polluted major cities, the clean air and
scattered temples making this is welcome stopover if you've come from the East. Despite being home to over 10 million people, the central part of the city is easy to get around.

◦ Two exquisite temples are essential viewing. Yuantong's 1200 year history is continued by orange-robed monks who come to pay homage and pray in the series of inscribed halls. Stone steps wind up the mountain top and the Yuan dynasty Buddhas are incredibly lifelike. Occupying a gloriously scenic spot above the city, Tanhua Temple is set within a garden of cedars and cypresses.

Huating Temple is nearby and also worth visiting. Closer to town but not as grand, Kunming Golden Temple is a peaceful place to spend an afternoon.

◦ Kunming is filled with green spaces, including the botanical gardens of Kunming World Expo. Dagun Yuan Park and Dian Lake glimpse at Yunnan's landscapes, with shimmering waters overlooked by pine-scented forests. Green lake in the heart of the city is a great people watching space.

• Resembling a conglomeration of giants' fingers, Shilin Stone Forest is a series of
limestone pinnacles marked by cracks and boulders. Three individual forests are close to each other: Greater Stone Forest, Lesser Stone Forest, and Naigu Stone Forest. Walk through the limestone peaks and you're quickly lost in a forest of remarkable rock formations. Shilin is usually explored as a day trip from Kunming, but there's a number of nice hotels set around Lake Chang and Lake Yue for longer trips.

• One of China's most complete and charming old towns, Dali is Southwest China's
most popular tourist destination. This is the 8th century capital of the Nanzhou Kingdom and is four to five hours from Kunming by bus. The train journey takes six to eight hours overnight.

◦ The Old Town is filled with traditional architecture from the Bai and Yi minorities, with tiled roofs sloping towards the mountains and antique stores hiding down alleyways. Other than the Three Pagodas, and the Daoist Zhonghe Temple, there are no must-see buildings. The attraction is simply

wandering around and soaking up the almost-complete preservation of a distant history. However, Dali is changing as tourist hoards pile in, and in peak season some of the charm is lost by an increasing commercialism.

◦ Barely 30 minutes outside of town, tiny Xizhou offer some of the best Qing architecture in China, with over 200 heritage listed houses that continue to be lived in. Knock on the door with a smile and you might get chance to look inside them.

◦ One of Dali's great attractions is the ease in which you can get out into traditional villages. Less than an hour by bicycle (quicker by taxi but far less enchanting), a section of 17 villages and small towns line up along the Erhai Lake. Yunnan Shaxi ancient town is the most popular. They're all connected by Qing Dynasty bridges and dotted with huge banyan trees. On the lake itself, boats head out to tiny islands and temples.

• Just two hours north of Dali, the World Heritage Naxi town of Lijiang is another of

China's most picturesque. It's all been refurbished and rebuilt in the ten centuries old style, making it a magnet for large Chinese tour groups. This somewhat detracts from the appeal. Lijiang's Old Town is architecturally spellbinding. There's no building out of place or in a state of ruin. Many of the cobblestone streets are connected by tiny stone bridges that curve above carp filled rivers. It's undoubtedly one of the country's most elegant ancient destinations. However, the crowds of Chinese tourists in red caps following their tour guide are immensely off putting. Lijuang is extremely touristic and the crowds can really detract from the experience, especially as it's brought a mass commercialism to the town. Sleeping in the old town helps as the tour groups leave by late afternoon.

• Two hours over a dramatic mountain pass, Lugu Lake is a blend of tranquil water

and tiny villages. Take a wooden canoe and paddle across the lake, spend the afternoon in villages of unwavering tradition, and drink your way through gallons of tea with an endless panorama over the blue.

Natural Adventures in Northwestern Yunnan (5 – 9 Days) Lijiang marks the start of Northwestern Yunnan, a region of rich Tibetan influence in the lower slopes of the Western Himalayas. From here, the road passes into Tibetan Sichuan, but it's also possible to loop back to Lijiang and Kunming. Framed by outstanding nature, this part of China is one of the best for

hikers. Unfortunately, this region can be uncomfortably cold in the winter months. While the south of Yunnan is at its cool moderate best in December, these Tibetan mountains will freeze many toes.

• Resplendently flanked by mountains of green and thousands of waterfalls, Tiger

Leaping Gorge is an accessible yet adventurous hiking destination. This is China's most popular multi-day trek for foreign tourists, although the trail remains quiet and untrammelled. The trailhead starts in Qiatou, roughly halfway between Lijiang and Shangri-la. It's a two to three day hike, with accommodation on route at a series of comfortable guesthouses.

• With the mountain literally hanging over the road, a journey in northwestern Yunnan continues north to the town of Shangri-la. Originally called Zhongdian, the town was renamed after the marketing authorities decided it was the hidden paradise in James Hilton's book The Lost Horizon.

◦ After being connected with a new airport, Shangri-la has been getting a Lijiang style makeover and redevelopment. However, a fire ravaged the Old Town in 2014, halting many projects and benefiting tourists who seek a less plastic experience. There are dozens of fascinating side streets to explore, where locals wave hello and whiffs of tea emanate from wooden window frames. Exploring without a map can easily fill three days with enchantment.

◦ The Old Town tourist shops may be overpriced but few places can offer such a range of strange souvenirs – yak tails, prayer wheels, Nixi pottery, Tibetan jewellery, incense, gold leafed art...

◦ Beautifully restored, Songzanlin Monastery is one of the finest in China outside Tibet. A resident lama blesses worshippers – local and foreign – and some of the temples are older than Tibet's Buddhist history. Commanding an enviable position on a rough mountainside, Songzanlin is a landmark straight from a postcard, topped off by a feeling of spirituality inside.

◦ Barely three miles out of town and sprawling across verdant grasslands, Napa Lake and its village are a great place to see local life and bicycle around.

• Breathtakingly remote, the Three Parallel Rivers National Park is another haven

for intrepid hikers. This is where three of the world's great rivers converge and flow side by side: the Yangtze, Mekong (Southeast Asia's main river) and Salween (Myanmar's second largest river). Each flows into an ocean thousands of miles apart. It's a dramatic and undiscovered destination, with most hikes requiring at least a week. Accommodation is in a mix of traditional Tibetan teahouses and camping, with the path crisscrossing across a series of rugged peaks. Hikes can be organized through tour companies in Lijiang and Shangri-la.

Cultural Adventures in the South of Yunnan

Everywhere south of Kunming is rural and remote, the forests filled with minority villages and very few tourists. Bordered by Tibet, Laos, and Burma, it has a feel of Southeast Asia rather than of China. An adventurous overland route takes you all the way to Laos or Vietnam to the south, but these destinations can also be explored on a one to two week loop from Kunming. The following destinations roughly run from Kunming south.

• Far less touristy than Lijiang, Jianshui is a delightful town of old buildings and
curious locals. A series of cobblestoned hutongs provide journeys past stone wells, tiny temples, and towers of ancient Buddhist splendor.

• A day trip from Jianshui, Yanzidong is the setting for a competition from National Geographic documentaries. Every August, the locals climb up the cliffs to retrieve eggs from birds' nests, with a few annually falling to their deaths. This was also a guerrilla headquarters for nationalist fighters and you can visit their home in Swallow Cave. Boat trips ply further into different caves, each filled with dazzling speleothems.

• Towards Vietnam, Wenshan is an important travel crossroads. The city isn't much
to shout about, but from here you'll find direct connections towards Vietnam and Hong Kong.

• In the other direction - heading west - the road to Myanmar passes through Heshun Old Town, a library of artifacts and architecture dating from the 14th century. You must pay to go over the gate and enter the old town, including the famous Washing Pavilions, a place of countless Romeo and Juliet stylized stories of fatal romances. Many grand courtyards and

residential houses are opened up to the public and the town is centered on a lotus pond and ornate pavilion.

• Evocatively resembling a postcard, the rice terraces of Yuanyang Country are the
natural highlight of this area, a kaleidoscope of lush green patterned across a dozen or so valleys. The villages of the rice terrace district are connected by winding roads and hiking trails, some of the best being Bada and Yishu. These two are connected by a wonderful day long hiking trail across the rice paddies. While it's possible to stay in Yuangyang old's town – Xinjie – the villages offer simple accommodation that's far more in keeping with the scenery and atmosphere.

• In the far south of the province, Xishuangbanna really evokes the tropical forests
of Southeast Asia, the green canopy standing over wooden villages and rugged hiking trails. This is the launching off point for trips to Laos.

• While Xishuangbanna itself receives a decent amount of tourist traffic, the surrounding villages are completely off the grid and offer some fascinating homestay hilltribe experiences. It's much less touristy than those in Southeast Asia and there's a good chance of getting invited to a traditional ceremony; like a wedding or funeral.

Chapter 11: Lhasa & Tibet

Few world destinations ignite the imagination like Tibet, the plateau of peace that's been annexed by mainland China. While Han people are being imported by the trainload to make Tibet more Chinese, this vast stateless nation continues to evoke the serene and surreal preconceptions of its Buddhist mountain culture. Rings of Himalayan peaks provide the backdrop to a landscape of arid unending plains, while every village continues to stoically protect and preserve its indigenous culture.

In another time, Tibet would be one of the world's great travel destinations. However, due to political sensitivity and unrest, Tibet is officially closed to independent foreign visitors. Entering the state requires a permit and there's no getting around the rule. Obtaining a permit necessitates visiting on a government arranged tour, with a government arranged guide who keeps you away from meeting the locals and seeing anything controversial (destroyed temples, ruined villages, etc). This is both expensive and restrictive, providing a glimpse at the sights but little immersion in the culture.

If Tibet seems unreasonably expensive or you're against the idea of a government organized tour, consider visiting the mountains of Sichuan and Yunnan. These regions have many Tibetan villages and genuine Tibetan culture, although the shifting administrative boundaries have seen them forced out of Tibet.

With Tibet currently off bounds to independent travel, this chapter is deliberately brief, covering just the bare essentials.

Practical Information

Arranging a Tour and a Tibet Permit

Various travel agents offer Tibet tours, each of them licensed by the government to do so. The high prices are mostly due to the cost of Tibetan permits; the Chinese don't want tourists here and don't mind heavily inflating the price. As a general rule, a tour will cost $200 – 300 a day, including permits, accommodation, transport, and food. You may find

something cheaper, and there's certainly more expensive options, but all offer much of the same.

By booking a tour, the travel agent will secure the permit. As of 2015, obtaining a permit independently is impossible and has been since 2010. It's difficult to recommend one company over another. They're all scrutinized and government sponsored. Cheaper prices can be found when you book directly in China, especially from companies based in Xian and Chengdu.

Getting to Tibet Travellers starting in Lhasa have the freedom of arriving independently, to be met at the airport or train station. These are possibilities because there is no option of exiting the train or plane before Lhasa.

The dramatic high-altitude railway offers one of the world's greatest train journeys, zigzagging up through the mountains before speeding across the plateau. These leave direct from Beijing and Xian, the journey from the capital taking around 38 hours. On route, oxygen masks drop down to help passengers cope with the high altitude. It's quicker but less scenic to fly to Lhasa where the government guide will be waiting in arrivals.

It's also possible to enter Tibet overland and slowly journey towards Lhasa. For these journeys you'll be met at the Tibetan border and escorted all the way. Your guide must show up for the border police to allow you in.

Tibet

Tibetan itineraries are restricted to what's offered by travel agents. In general there are three typical routes and options:

• Lhasa is Tibet's centerpiece and it's hard to imagine not visiting this magical capital

in the sky. Allow three to four days to really enjoy it, the vast monastery complexes engulfed by a stunning circle of snowy Himalayan peaks. You'll have most freedom here and tourists are generally allowed to walk around without a guide (but carry your permit with you). The traditional residence of many high ranking llamas, Lhasa showcases Tibetan culture on its largest scale. Even the very Chinese new part of town can't detract from the experience.

• From Sichuan, Xian, and Golmud, beautiful journeys take you into the Himalayas and the northeastern part of the plateau. These itineraries will

connect a series of Tibetan villages, snaking a way towards the capital. Most have impressive monasteries, indigenous lifestyles, and a very local experience.

• From the northwest of China , another road crosses the plateau and crosses the

wild and uninhabited desert of Tibet. This journey has less potential stops than when coming from Sichuan, and the scenery isn't as mountainous. However, it offers the plateau at its most ferocious and untamed. Few world journeys can compare to how the barrenness is interrupted by colorful shows of local culture.

Chapter 12: Northwest China

For many centuries, the Old Silk Road was the connection between the East and West, an evocative trade route connected by caravans and caravansaries. It reached from Xian in China to Istanbul and Egypt in the West, before the advent of maritime trade saw its demise. Northwest China is a rural and remote region, dotted with the memoirs to the Silk Road, the world's greatest ever trade route. It's a region of historic towns, trade centers, and a culture that's hardly changed since the days of swapping saffron for cotton.

Travel is challenging and long here, the route dictated by a single road and rail line that lurches across the desert plateau. You'll need at least a week just to do the journey by land, and that's without stopping to explore and enjoy the destinations. While Tibet really ignites travelers' imaginations, Northwest China is also home to unique ethnicities and cultures, something that's a major part of the experience. You don't come to see Northwest China. Visit this part of the world and you're immediately submerged in the local way of life.

This chapter covers the vast area of China that lies west of Xian and north of Tibet.

Practical Information

Getting Here: Northwest China's lack of visitors is mostly explained by the logistical headaches of getting here. With the closure of Tibet's borders, there are only two obvious options. Urumqi is the obvious entry point coming by air, tucked away in the far northwest of the region. Urumqi and Kashgar are also the entry points for anyone on longer Silk Road journeys from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. A number of other airports have opened in recent years, including Dunhuang and Xining. However, they're serviced by only a few flights that head to Beijing, Xian, and elsewhere in Northwest China. Prices can be expensive.

The other route is an overland one, following the original Silk Road out of Xian in the central regions.

Getting Around: Other than going local and traveling by donkey cart, there's not much choice here. A couple of bad roads cuts through the desert from east and west, and it's flanked by a railway that does the same. Both head from Urumqi to Xian, your choice is often not which way to go but where to get off.

The Old Silk Road A Northwest China itinerary is easy to plan with the region spread out along the Silk Road from Xian to Kashgar / Urumqi. All these destinations are listed from east to west.

• Lanzhou isn't the most auspicious welcome to the Silk Road, its cultural relics

hidden behind a thriving modernity and industrial center. The attractions can be toured in one day and there's less in the way of unique culture than further west. Start in the Gansu Provincial Museum for an overview of the region, then admire the Lanzhou Xiguan Mosque, a piece of Islamic history that arrived over 800 years ago. The White Pagoda Temple dates from Yuan times while the Tianfusha Palace and Solemn Temple have a poignant history from the 7th century. Out of town, but the highlight of Lanzhou, are the Buddhist grottoes of Bingling Si. Sculpted Buddhas are everywhere and they're accessed by boat across a reservoir.

• Due north of Lanzhou, and a side trip from the Silk Road, the semi-autonomous region of Ningxia provides an accessible trip into thick sandy desert dotted with ruins. Battered by sandstorms and clinging to its bygone era, Yinchuan boasts a series of provocative landmarks; the Western Xia Tombs, North Pagoda, Chengtian Temple, Drum Tower, Nanmen Tower, and Nanguan Mosque, are all fascinating cultural relics that haven't been treated with the over-exuberant redevelopment brush. Quirkiest and strangest is the Western Xia Park, an igloo shaped mound of rock that towers above the desert. It takes a couple of days to really see it all.

• Engulfed by sand, Ningxia's second iconic destination is the town of Zhongwei.

From here it's easy to arrange trips into the Tenggeli Desert, a place of towering dunes that burn red and yellow as the sun crosses the sky. Remains of the Great Wall of China are nearby. They're nothing like the vast sections near Beijing; this is a selection of crumbling stone that has slowly disintegrated. It's a stark contrast to anywhere in the northeast of China but an equally impressive look at history.

• Travel east into Qinghai Province and the endless pastures are filled with hairy
grazing yaks. Tucked into high mountains and the most sparsely populated region of China, Qinghai is a melting pot of Mongolians, Tibetans, Han, and ethnic Muslims from the west. A direct route goes to Golmud and Xining, with both towns providing options for one to three day adventures on the Tibetan plateau.

◦ By chartering a car with driver, it's possible to take three days connecting Lanzhou with Xining. Stop at Xiahe's Labrang Monastery, one of the most important outside Tibet, then wind over a series of plus 4,000 meter peaks to the small town of Tongren. Elaborate Thangka paintings cover monastery walls in this peculiar plateau town. As you come into Xining, the route passes the Ta'e Si Monastery, another very important place in Buddhist history.

◦ Xining is a mesmerizing cultural crossroads, harmoniously combining each of Qinghai's disparate communities. In one day you can explore the Tulou Temple of Beishan Mountain, Qinghai Tibet Cultural Centre, Museum of China Tibetan Medicine Culture, Xining Donguan Mosque, and the crumbling relics of Xining Nanshan Mountain. Each is impressive, but the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts. China's largest lake, Kokonor is a wide peaceful space surrounded by the dust of the desert.

◦ Golmud is famous as the jumping off point for Tibet, but you don't need to necessarily cross the border to get a glimpse at the region. The Kunlun Mountain Pass offers surreal mountain scenery, snow almost always clinging to the road. It's the most accessible point of the Qinghai Golmud Kunlun Mountain National Park. Tangulla Pass and Chaerhan Salt Lake also offer sublime natural panoramas with the evidence of local life dotted along the mountainsides.

• North of Golmud and surrounded by towering sand dune desert, Dunhuang is one
of the most important stops on the old Silk Road. With a 2100 year old history, it is one of the preeminent trading towns of world history.

◦ Within walking distance of the old town center, Mingshashan – Yueyaquan National Park is an expanse of huge sand dunes that are particularly impressive when they change color at dawn and dusk. In the heart of the dunes is a lake, a true oasis of blue surrounded by yellow. It's

easy to also organize single or multi-day camel trips through the desert, with mats rolled out for sleeping under the stars.
◦ 15 miles into the desert, the World Heritage Mogao Caves are filled with thousands of Buddha statues and treasures left by monks traveling along the Silk Road. One Buddha stands 35 meters tall, while some caves require a flashlight to spot the diminutive sculptures hidden in the corners.
◦ Dunhuang's old town is a timeless ode to desert trading, the sand battered houses making for a quiet few days lost in history. A couple of hours out of town, Yumenguan was the original entry gate into ancient China and there are some evocative Great Wall remains to see nearby.
• From Dunhuang to Kashgar, the Silk Road cuts through the Taklamakan Desert, the world's second largest shifting sand desert. Conditions are tough; it's hot, the dirt tracks get overtaken by sand, and you'll be covered in dust with a few minutes. There are three route options:
◦ The Northern caravan route passes through Hami, Turpan, Korla, and Kuche, before reaching Kashgar. It's accessible all year round with each stop being a day hour apart by passable road. Each stop is a fascinating piece of history stuck in time. These destinations are also connected to Kashgar by railway, with Turpan to Kashgar taking 22 hours by the fast train.
◦ Far more challenging, the souther route takes you through Cherchen, Khotan, and Yarkand. These towns thrived on trading jade and are extremely unspoiled; expect vodka drinking with the locals, watery yak meat soups, and real off the beaten track adventure. However, note that the dirt tracks are in terrible condition and it's a long bumpy ride.
• Urumqi is the region's capital and transport base. Many will pass through here but it's usually not worth lingering unless you're looking for some modern comfort after a long desert journey. Urumqi is a very dominant Chinese city, without the charm of Kashgar, that lies a long overnight train journey to the southwest.
• Kashgar is one of the world's great trading posts and the center of East Turkistan,
the stateless Uyghur nation. Its streets of heritage and peaceful atmosphere make it a haven for overland travelers, many staying for up to week as they recuperate from long journeys.

◦ Kashgar's animal markets showcase unadulterated traditional culture. Sheep and donkeys are on sale, the locals coming together to haggle for hours over a price. Expect some very bizarre sights.
◦ Kashgar's Old Town is a maze of Silk Road houses, mosques, and bazaars, compact enough to explore on foot yet big enough to keep you interested for days. It's a living heritage site, the buildings still occupied by the Uyghurs who continue to trade in animal products. You can't miss the New Town but you'll want to avoid it. The flashing neon and modern shopping malls don't sit comfortably alongside local culture.
◦ Two distinct parts of the Old Town are essential for those short on time. Areya Street is the most complete area of Uyghur style architecture, while Gaotai Minju is a labyrinth of mud houses seemingly on the verge of collapse.
◦ The tombs of Mahmud Kashgari, Apak Hoja, and Yusup Khass Hajip, are elegant resting places of East Turkistan's heroes. Each showcases exquisite Islamic interiors of sapphire tiles and elaborate inscriptions.
◦ For weird and wonderful food, Kashgar is a surreal as it comes. Sheep testicles, cow lungs, animal brain, goat eyeballs...every part of the animal is eaten and hundreds of locals congregate at evening markets that barbecue and boil their food. Each stall specializes in one weird dish.

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